Columbine Time

WILL IRWIN

David S. Irwin

Dear Dad:

Will is away on his long lecturing trip and this book has just come. I am sending it to you because I know he would want me to do that.

Affectionately

Inez

Inez Haynes Irwin

"Don't You Just Detest People Who Say You Can't Understand Things Because You're Too Young"

Columbine Time

By WILL IRWIN

Author of The Next War, etc.

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CHAPTER I

Columbine Time

JUNE as it grew late and lush brought the great virginal white columbines, as August, wanton of the decadent year, was to bring their flaunting sisters in red and yellow. The transformations of those valleys among the peaks are violent and sudden; as violent as the lives they cradle, as sudden as mountain passions. One June evening the hillsides lay in a pattern of brown and fresh springlike green, but no white; that was all above, where the perpetual snows of the peaks sent down on each fresh breeze little flurries of winter. Through that pattern the columbine bushes lay in domes of dark green still unillumined, as being creatures waiting for a soul. Then one night, at about that period when the sun stands on the northern border of his realm, the first novice among the virgin sisterhood would put on her veil and turn her snowy bosom to the summer moon. By morning the hillside would

be dotted as with flakes of snow; by another day it was like a summer snowfall. The white was all upon their upper surfaces; beneath, they were of a transparent blue — the colors of the Virgin.

They are as whimsically impermanent, these novices of the mountains, as young love itself. No one may gather the snow columbine, any more than he may bring to young love fulfillment of all its airy imaginings. When you have broken the stem the spell is past. What was columbine is now a shower of white petals, formed like an elfin shoe, fallen upon the green dome of its habitation to wither while you look, to fade within a summer hour into a prosaic nothingness.

That morning, as the Cottonwood stage stopped beyond the ford of Bear Creek, Tommy Coulter stood posed knee-deep in columbine domes. On the surface of things this was pure accident. Tommy, partner in a grubstake above the cañon a mile to the north, had developed a sudden aversion to tunneling for a hypothetical gold lode, had made to himself the excuse that he must borrow a spirit level from

the North Star outfit down the creek, had suddenly dropped his pick and started on foot down the white hill-slope. There among the peaks June is a belated spring. Tommy being somewhat unread in the poets did not know that spring is the season when the Lord of Life knocks at the door of human hearts, lays subtle traps for young and unwary feet. All he knew was that, as he threaded the winding trail among the domes of columbine bush, he found himself looking with a vague and poignant pleasure, a kind of ghost of rapture, upon the great white-elf bells and the whimsical mariposa lilies sprinkled between.

I ask you to believe that it was the Lord of Life who drew him so to the ford of prosaically named Bear Creek. It is harder logically to account for the action of the rattailed white bronco which served that day as nigh leader on the Cottonwood stage. For just as the team scrambled up the bank and started on to the turn round the point of the hill, his wild soul revolted at the late indignity of a cold-water plunge and at the general state of being a horse. He threw back his ears, stopped; and when the

driver, stifling his oaths in consideration for the ladies, began to pour leather, bucked clean out of the traces. The snaffle of his nigh rein parted close to the bit. His teammate seized upon this excuse to raise the devil.

Even the big sober American wheelers caught the infection. The whole team became a scrimmage of dancing hoofs, tossing manes, kicks, plunges and squeals. The express messenger and a horseman among the outside passengers hit the ground almost simultaneously. The white disturber of the lead team, at the gentle but steady pull of a horse-master hand upon his bit, let his storm of panic subside into a gentle dancing and trembling. His fear had been stage-managed, anyhow; and in this gradual subsidence he was merely saving his face.

Tommy, who started to run forward when he saw the trouble begin, stopped short by the side of the road when he saw it die away. He stood there among the white-mottled domes of the columbine bushes, which made behind him a most inappropriate background if you took into consideration that this was a very mascu-

line young male, standing five feet eleven in his bare feet, his frame spring-hung with wiry muscles in that age of human muscle when it seems capable of anything. At second and less prejudiced sight you might have realized that a floral background was not so inappropriate after all; for the clear-eyed young creature, with one lock of sun-gilded hair escaping from under the brim of his flapping sombrero, had a sturdy beauty. It is true that his features were irregular; too much jaw, and a line of the nose which defied the conventionalties of Grecian sculpture. It is also true, however, that his blond skin had tanned to a rich gold, which showed off to advantage a pair of dark blue eyes as clear and yet as deep as the pools in the creeks below.

Also as he posed there among the columbines, his weight slightly on the right foot, his hips a little out of line, one hand resting carelessly on the band of his overalls, he had a most manly stand. It showed a confident repose, an absolute stillness which, you felt by instinct, might awaken at any moment to swift dynamic action. And the open collar of his blue flannel

shirt revealed a throat and neck like a pillar of the temple.

So he stood at watch, his eyes alone moving, until the white disturber of the lead team was quelled to meek submission, until the driver had begun to install a new rein from the tool box. The show being over, Tommy had turned, blurring the picture which he was unconsciously making against the hillside, when he was startled into new immobility by a woman's voice addressing him.

"Young man," said the voice, "would you mind bringing me some of those flowers?"

Then for the first time he noticed the stage-coach itself. From the open window section above the door a woman's head was leaning. He was aware of a bonnet whose red roses made a splash in the shadows of the coach door, of a yellow kid glove as tight over the hand as the skin of a sausage, of an aura of city ways, before he saw that a plump and middle-aged but pleasing countenance was smiling out at him.

"Oh, yes," he replied after just a moment of

embarrassed hesitation. And then: "I'm afraid they won't last."

As he set himself carefully to pluck the nearest stalks with his stubby fingers he became conscious that there was another woman inside; a colloquy in feminine tones, the words indistinguishable, came softly, thrillingly to his ears. He lifted his bunch of flowers carefully; but as he advanced to the window a shower of white petals strewed his way.

"Only two or three of them stuck, ma'am," he said as he handed them carefully over. Then again he froze momentarily into stillness at what he saw in the seat beyond the middle-aged woman. At first it was only the eyes — big and deep brown, and fixed on his face candidly yet with a curiously intent expression. He felt somewhere within his brain a little shock like a hammer blow, a focus of sensation from which thrills and shivers, disturbing but delicious, coursed through his nerves. Then, as though his sight were growing accustomed to a strong sudden light, the young face which framed those eyes became clear to his vision.

With that olive skin, with those eyes, it

should have been oval. It started out to be oval, too; but at about the point where a wisp of her fine, wavy, blue-black hair escaped from the confines of her fashionable bonnet it changed intention and moved downward to a kind of delicious, piquant squareness. Her lips were the color of roses overlaid by a morning mist. He was about to catalogue her nose when —

"Thanks," said the elder woman. "Didn't many of them last, just as you said."

The words brought him to action with a jerk. I am not sure but that for his coat of tan you might have observed that Tommy was blushing. He handed over the flowers with a slight awkwardness, and the last of the petals sprinkled themselves among their own leaves.

"Why, the idea — gone already!" exclaimed the older woman. But as she took them she looked down; and Tommy boldly ventured another glance at the girl. She was still looking innocently, intently, on his face. He formulated to himself, this time, her expression. It held something sweetly familiar; only long afterward was he to realize that his young mother used to bend upon him the same look. And now

she spoke for the first time — spoke in a soft low voice with an accent a little unfamiliar to his Western ears. The syllables, indeed, came out slightly but deliciously blurred, thereby betraying, had Tommy only known it, her youth.

"What a dreadful pity!" said the girl. "It's almost a shame we picked them." Tommy liked that "we." "And they looked so beautiful, growing there!"

For the first time the flicker of a smile trembled upon her lips, faded into her expression of sweet seriousness.

Tommy deprived himself for a moment of that feast for his eyes to note that the driver, having put in the spare rein, was going over the harness on suspicion of further damage; that there would be a little more time.

"I'll try again!" he said shortly in the big bass rumble of his masculine voice.

His accents, like the girl's, were unformed. He was aware then that it was the first time he had spoken to the girl, and again unaccountably he blushed.

"I can't see that it's any use," said the older woman.

Tommy turned away, nevertheless, registering with his glance that she had the same dark hair, the same piquant squareness of countenance as the girl; that they must be mother and daughter. Most carefully now he broke off just three stalks of columbine, carried them back with the intentness of movement and face of a juggler balancing a pole. But when he reached the window he did not put them into the outstretched, gloved hands of the older woman. With that same intent eye upon his job he passed them into the dim recesses of the coach. The girl gave just a little start, as one awakened from reverie, reached out and took them.

"Careful, Nellie!" said her mother.

The girl's ten ungloved fingers, flower stalks themselves of an untold whiteness and pinkness, closed gently about the stalks of their sister flowers. She sat straight upright now, her navy-blue jersey of the eighties defining a waist which needed no corset to make it slender, her young bosom curving delicately upward into a line of beauty. The petals had not yet fallen. Scarcely breathing, she held the stalks upright

like a scepter; and Tommy thought of an old sacred picture he had seen in the cathedral at Albuquerque. Then the girl gave the very shadow of a start, as though remembering her manners.

"Thank you!" she said, her grave brown eyes turning on his and again illuminating a lamp within his soul.

The words seemed to have been produced on an intake of her breath; and Tommy was aware of a faint, delicious odor. Then she spoke more openly and naturally, but still with that young blurring of the syllables.

"Oh, I hope I can keep them all the way to Carbonado," she said. "They would look so pretty in our rooms at the Marlborough!"

At this the older woman turned and shot one swift glance at the younger. She was looking, however, at the columbines, from which one pure bell nodded toward her profile, bringing out by resemblance its flowerlike delicacy of line, by contrast its creamy richness of tone.

Just then the stage driver, who had clambered back to the box, sprang his regular joke

without which the Cottonwood stage could not possibly have run.

"All aboard — all who can't get a board get a shingle," he called.

The white disturber, at the emphatic crack of leather by his ear, threw himself into the collar. The stage lurched forward. A shower of petals fell from the stalks to the girl's lap; but that one virgin sister of hers still remained true to its stem, still made obeisance to higher beauty. The coach door jerked abruptly from Tommy's range of vision.

"Thanks — good-by!" said the older woman.

"You're welcome—good-by!" called Tommy; and he fancied that he heard from within a faint echo of his own last word. The coach was gone.

Someone else was gone, had Tommy only possessed the clairvoyant sense to see the invisible — someone trailing rosy vapors from white wings as he coursed over the peaks. The Lord of Life, having laid carefully and true those plots to which he gives his personal attention, never trifles with details. He leaves them to human will and ingenuity — mostly, mark

you, to the will and ingenuity of his favored sex, woman.

Besides, he was very busy that morning. An Indian rajah, temporarily much bored with life, would in five minutes more pass the doorway of a house from which, in the torchlight, he would glimpse the black eyes of a high-caste maiden shining behind a loosened hookah veil. That needed further arrangement. Ten minutes hence a young gentleman of France would be taking a one-horse shay to make his formal proposal for an arranged marriage. He must be impelled to change his course so as to pass a garden of Tours where a daughter of destiny was at that moment training a vine. A young man in the coffee business, just returned from ten years of Brazil, was now strolling northward on Broadway, atingle with the sights of home. Southward on Broadway walked a freshling school-teacher, toward her boarding house and luncheon. Somewhere in the region of Grace Church their ways would cross. To baffle those odd conventionalties by which humanity feebly tries to beat his purposes the Lord of Life must manage a street accident.

These were only the very special cases to which he gives his personal attention, the perfect instances worthy of a connoisseur. The rest he leaves sometimes to his assistants, but mostly to those forces which he implanted in the beginning, when the first cell in the primal slum crept to its pulpy mate.

Tommy walked dreamily back up the flower-dotted hillside and along the crest of sparse dwarf pines, to the mouth of his tunnel about the cañon. He had completely forgotten the spirit level he had gone to borrow. His eyes were looking far away, so that he stumbled upon the loose rocks along the trail. And once the softened expression about his eyes expressed itself in articulate speech.

"She's a lulu!" said Tommy to himself, to the mountains, to the columbines.

Only that; but the tone held the sweetness of all the love sonnets ever sung.

At about the same moment Mrs. Amanda Bates, widow, unpacking her valises and carpetbag in the best chamber of the Hotel Marlborough, spoke sharply to her daughter.

"For goodness and all," said Mrs. Bates,

"what ever are you doing, with all these things to unpack and the trunks still downstairs and yourself to dress up and Mr. Sabin calling at noon?"

"Nothing, mother," replied her daughter. And she put down, slyly and rather hastily, the paper-covered volume of Molly Bawn, by The Duchess, in which she had just pressed a blossom of blue-and-white columbine.

CHAPTER II

IN THOSE days there were forty-niners still in the land. Old fellows of grizzled heads and knotted hands, the failures of that immortal company, they were still clumping along the trails with burro and pack, still following new paths to the fortune which ever eluded them. They had the cynicism born of failure, but they enjoyed in the community the tolerant respect justly due to experience. Such was Marty McGuire, chief partner of the three who were driving on a grubstake the Big Hope Tunnel above the Lone Grave Cañon.

Under the flickering glare of their miner's lamps Marty was at this moment pounding a drill held by Jim Tewson, third partner on the grubstake.

"Tommy seems to be gone some time," said Jim, turning the drill.

Marty dropped a stroke accurate and true upon the drill head, and let his breath explode in a grunt before he said: "Got his excuse I guess."

"Well," said Jim, turning the drill head again, "it ought to be a good one. He's a nice hard-working kid."

"H'm!" exclaimed Marty cynically at the end of his next blow and grunt.

As though this bit of conversation were working up to a stage entrance, a shadow blotted the distant spot of light made by the tunnel mouth and a miner's lamp became visible, bobbing larger and large as it approached. Marty pounded and grunted explosively, Jim turned mechanically, until Tommy himself stood beside them, the lamp on his cap no brighter than his excited eye.

"I want to get off to go to Carbonado," said Tommy without further ado.

His partners regarded him for a moment in silence, Marty with the sledge held back ready for a stroke, Jim gripping the drill in place. Then the sledge dropped from Marty's nerveless, disgusted hands.

"You want to go to Carbonado, do you? You want to go to Carbonado! What fur?" His tone expressed the righteous disgust of a judge

sentencing a felon for some especially low crime. "To git biled?"

"Sho, Marty," put in the tolerant Jim, "you know the kid's too young to be goin' after that stuff!"

"Hell he is!" replied Marty, looking over the offender with an eye that gleamed cynically, skeptically, in the triple lamplight. "Last week he split a new pick handle, didn't he? And he's gittin old enough to vote, ain't he?" Now he addressed Tommy again. "What fur?" he repeated. "And how long? What fur?"

Tommy dropped his gaze.

"Nothin'!" he said.

"Didn't I tell you?" roared Marty. "Somethin' he's plumb ashamed of, that's what!"

"Now look here!" put in Jim. "It's all right goin' away once in a while. I have to git in my bust myself. But right now it's summer, and we ain't got but three or four months before she begins to freeze up — and not a streak showin' yet. Can't you put it off?"

"I want to go to Carbonado," replied Tommy stubbornly. His lower lip had the expression of a naughty child.

"All right," said Marty. "All right all-righty. And John W. Sabin will see you there swellin' round in your store clothes, an' he'll think he knows what we're doin' with the cash he put up for this here grubstake. You don't expect this claim is goin' to back your little bust, do you?"

Tommy momentarily took the offensive.

"I've got two hundred dollars in the bank that I made working in the General Longstreet last winter," he said. "Guess I can do what I want with it, can't I?"

"It's once out, always out, on this claim," said Marty, with baneful foreboding in his voice. "You go to Carbonado now and you go for good."

"All right!" said Tommy, his voice giving the effect of one who is impersonating heavy defiance. "All right!"

Jim said nothing; but when the kid's lamp was only an intermittent spark, already dimming in the light of the tunnel mouth, he rested a moment from pouring water into the drill hole and remarked, "I bet it's a girl!"

"Sure it's a girl," said Marty. "Ain't I been married three times, not to mention Injuns?"

"He'll come back," said Jim.

"He will," said Marty. "An' I'll be just fool enough when she shows to let him in on this grubstake again."

The good-natured Jim, who had been waiting to learn just this, said nothing but only smiled down on the drill head.

Out at the log cabin over the tunnel mouth Tommy had already pushed back the door of gunny sacking, was tearing open the buttons of his blue working shirt. With a haste almost unseemly he opened his valise and proceeded to shave — no great job — and to array himself in his store clothes with his new blue necktie. He finished by shining his fashionable square-cut shoes from the blacking box under Jim's bed. When these sartorial cares were done he did not, like a young man sincerely intending to quit the job, pack all his belongings. He merely gathered up and threw helter-skelter into the valise such objects as he needed to make a proper fashionable appearance in Carbonado — as three clean shirts, his extra neckties and half

a dozen collars. His working clothes, his books, his accordion and his rifle he left as they were, thus proving that he, young though he was, assessed Marty's threats at their proper value. He did, however, complete the costume appropriate to a gentleman in that region and period by slipping a double-action .38 into the appropriate pocket. Then he clumped up the trail, carefully picking the way to preserve the shine of his shoes. Where the trail met the Carbonado road he hailed a passing freighter and borrowed a ride into town on the box.

He had drawn his two hundred dollars from the First National Bank; he had registered at the Marlborough, agreeing to pay ten dollars a day, American plan; he had been installed in a luxurious twelve-by-fourteen room on the second floor; he was washing off the dust of travel — before he woke as from a trance and wondered what on earth he was doing there. From the moment when he handed a bunch of columbines to that dim vision in the shadows of the Cottonwood stage he had moved more like an automaton than like a reasoning human being with a free will. Looking back he could

not even tell at what moment he had absorbed or acquired the conviction that he must go to the Marlborough. But there he was; and of course down in the depths of his heart he knew why. What astonished him, now that he had awakened from his trance, was the speed and certainty with which he had acted. He felt a kind of emptiness of purpose, a vague speculation as to the next move. He blushed as he wondered if Marty and Jim would ever guess what a fool he was making of himself.

The clang of a gong, resounding through the corridors and echoing in the upper hallways of the Marlborough, roused him from these solitary meditations. It was dinner-time, and Tommy's attack of love, malignant though it was, had not yet dulled in him the wolfish hunger bred from work, fresh air and twenty years. He finished his washing hastily, descended, joined the crowd of tourists and ore buyers trooping into the dining room. He had finished a plate of oyster soup and the biscuit shooter was arraying the rest of the menu about him in little platters of thick white crockery and birds' bathtubs, when a kind of hush in the

general conversation made him pause with a fork poised and become aware of his external surroundings.

Tommy had to look down a moment to conceal his sudden flush. When he dared look up again he could almost have reached out and touched the hem of her skirt. Escorted with pomp and ceremony by the white-clad head waitress, she had reached the next table to his — she, of all the world, she. Now she was sinking into her seat, her head and shoulders and bust rising from a white and Nile-green foam created by billow on billow of organdie over her bustle. Her hands began to flutter over a napkin no whiter than they. The rest of the guests got along with small Turkey-red napkins; and even these were a recent touch of Eastern luxury. But the napkins at the special table of John W. Sabin, owner of the hotel and of almost everything else worth owning in Carbonado, were of white linen.

In the rush of surprise and perplexity Tommy registered this fact. She was a guest at John W. Sabin's table.

She was speaking now; and Tommy, follow-

ing the direction of her eyes, saw that she had not entered alone, that the elder woman of the meeting by the ford, very stiff in jet-trimmed garnet surah silk, was seating herself with her back toward him. Then, the range of vision widening as the first dazzle of her died away from his eyes, he beheld what confirmed his fears and ruined the perfection of the moment. There was a third member of the party. Between mother and daughter appeared the hawklike profile, the drooping grizzled mustache, the seamed, tanned skin of John W. Sabin, magnate of the camp, upon whose grubstake Tommy was at that moment loafing.

The rush of blood which was making flashes across Tommy's vision seemed to have affected his hearing. Though he sat at the next table he caught at first no word of their conversation. He was aware, though, that John W. Sabin was addressing the girl; that the mother, whose pose of back indicated an intense interest in the conversation, was taking no part in it; that the girl was smiling demurely but with reserve. Then her eyes traveled for a moment past Mr. Sabin and caught Tommy's. He fancied that

she gave the very shade of a start. The prettiest tangle, as of perplexity, agitated the smooth strip of forehead below her black, delicate film of bang, to be succeeded by a faint light of recognition. Demurely and with the proper reserve, she bowed; and Tommy managed an awkward bob of his head. John W. Sabin with his own simple native directness, turned, looked Tommy squarely over; but fortunately his face held no look of recognition. The mother threw a glance across her shoulder; then she, too, gave a bow, which made a light tinkling among the jet ornaments of her corsage; but it was stiff, formal and impersonal. Tommy heard a word or two passed in undertones; doubtless they were identifying him. He felt somehow a quick spurt of injury.

Now, as he methodically took his time about eating, he could catch the conversation here and there.

"She's a permanent camp, all right," Mr. Sabin was saying to the girl. "Denver won't be a patch on her when we get her where she ought to be. We're goin' to be the state capital before we get through."

"It's very picturesque. I just adore it!" said the girl.

"Oh, 'tain't much now," said Mr. Sabin, "but you wait till we git the railroad through. We're goin' to have three new brick blocks a-buildin' before the first engine has stopped tooting. Yes, sir, and our congressman has got orders to rush an appropriation for a hundred-thousand-dollar post office. And next will be an operay house."

The mother murmured her appreciation. "They tell me you've done wonders for the town already," Tommy heard her say.

"Oh, not very much," said Mr. Sabin; "but pretty good, I guess, for an old busted prospector who had just one burro and one shirt to his back when he staked out the first claim in Carbonado three years ago."

"Only three years!" exclaimed the mother.

"Three years the tenth of July, Mrs. Bates," said Mr. Sabin.

That was her name, then — Bates. Nellie Bates — he had the surname already. Nellie Bates! The divine music of it!

"That's the day for the housewarming of

the new shack," said Mr. Sabin. "I couldn't wait for the railroad. When that comes in and we can get bricks, I'm going to have a regular house with a furnace and a bathroom and this here tapestry wall paper that I saw in Denver. Then I can sell the shack that I'm building now. We're going to start a blaze under sassiety in Carbonado with a Firemen's Ball next Friday night. You've got to come! We're going to get the band of the Little Casino for a regular ball. Say! What's the matter with one of you ladies leading the grand march with me? That's the ticket! We'll start her off with a regular grand march."

The girl was at that moment looking down upon her plate. She raised her liquid eyes not at first toward Mr. Sabin but toward her mother. Tommy saw a moment of hesitation, could fancy that some signaling glance had passed between the two women, before the girl turned her eyes upon Mr. Sabin and said, "I'm sure we'd be delighted."

Mrs. Bates took up the conversation then, Tommy eavesdropping without shame, while eating by pure animal instinct. He could catch

only an occasional word, however; though once or twice John W. Sabin laughed immoderately. When the conversation again became audible Mr. Sabin was talking, in a booming voice and an accent which cut like steel, about his matched two-twenty road team. It cost him, he seemed willing to tell the world, two thousand dollars.

"How interesting!" commented the girl.

"You're all goin for a spin behind 'em this afternoon, too," said Mr. Sabin. "They sure do eat up road. Tell you what you do; you come out with me right after dinner to look over the mines."

"We'll be delighted," murmured Mrs. Bates.

But the girl, when Mr. Sabin turned to her, hesitated. She spoke at last, and more distinctly than usual.

"I think the altitude has affected me a little," she said. "Would you mind if I napped for an hour or so? Then, if you and Mr. Sabin aren't back by three o'clock, I might take a little walk round town."

"Alone?" queried her mother.

"Well, why not?" queried Mr. Sabin, with a

touch of resentment in his tone. "A lady's as safe in the streets of this camp as she would be in any ballroom in the land."

By now the head waitress, attending personally to the wants of the Marlborough's eminent owner, had removed the fringes of small dishes about the plates and was with great ceremony laying out Indian pudding in saucers. Their dinner was soon to end; and Tommy, who had already finished, could see no excuse for lingering. He rose, therefore; and the motion brought a glance from the girl, accompanied by the very ghost of a smile. In a rosy haze he walked out into the lobby, already filling with satisfied diners, who lolled in the wooden chairs, smoking, plying toothpicks, comparing specimens.

That magic hour of three o'clock had burned into his mind, suggesting a plan so simple and yet so daring that he flushed at the thought. For the present he had an unaccountable fear of being caught watching Mr. Sabin and party emerge from the dining room. So, as nonchalantly as he could manage, he strolled out to the plank sidewalk of Main Street. Past the six-

mule freight teams struggling through the dust, past swinging doors which even at that hour gave forth the sounds of loud pianos, past all the soiled and dusty but romantic confusion of a mining camp struggling toward the dignity of a railroad and townhood, his feet seemed to carry him involuntarily toward the Arizona House.

Through its swinging door, unfurnished with that modest protecting screen which usually guarded vice from the eye of respectability in the days when the Demon Rum held unchecked sway, he passed into the barroom. This boasted the longest solid-mahogany bar in the West, and was beyond doubt the most elegantly furnished room in Carbonado Camp. That bar was broken in the midst of its polished length by an insertion of plate glass four feet long, from beneath which glittered dully a mosaic of five, ten and twenty dollar gold pieces. The long mirrors which reflected back the dull glint of this little fortune were decorated with Spencerian scrolls drawn in soap, surrounding such legends as "Trust is dead; bad pay killed him," "All mixed drinks, four bits," and "If you want

trouble, find it outside." Scroll-worked cabinets between the mirrors held bottles containing those highly colored drinks for which no one seemed to call in Carbonado Camp, but which were necessary in those days to well-conducted bars. Over all was draped an American flag, its folds very dusty, its colors a little fly-specked. The chandeliers which held the big oil lamps were ornamented by frills and skirts of pink and blue paper, cut into lace-like patterns. There were other items suggesting elegance and prosperity, such as a big genuine oil painting of the Grand Cañon and a cabinet containing specimens of horn silver and free gold. This was the club of the town, the place into which one drifted when he had nothing else to do, the center of gossip.

And gossip was already busy at the Arizona House. Against the bar leaned half a dozen miners in high boots, overalls and rough frieze coats, drinking their afternoon draft democratically with mining men in glove-fitting store clothes and large diamonds. To Tommy's ears, sharpened and attuned that day to but a single theme, came out this: "Well, both of them

ladies are lollapaloozers if anybody drives up in a hack and asks you."

"What are they doing here?" asked another voice.

That miner who had spoken first—he was a foreman on Mr. Sabin's Wild Rose property—gave a sly wink.

"John W.," he said, "goes down to Denver and they takes him out in sassiety. He meets this here outfit at one of them dude swarries. And he asks them up here to visit him at the Marlborough, his shack not being ready. Seems to be in a hurry, sort of suddenlike, as usual. Well, it's time. He's been a bachelor long enough, with the stake he's got. Nice-looking girl, and a credit to the camp too."

"Somebody was telling me," remarked one of the mining men, "that they're already engaged."

"Nothin' in it," replied the foreman. "I looked particular at her hand, and she wasn't wearin' no diamond ring on her wedding finger. You don't suppose old John W. wouldn't do the right thing by her, do you?"

"Where do they come from—the East?" inquired another voice.

A prospector who had hitherto refrained from conversation parted his hairy lips and thusly spake: "East nothin'! I knew the old party as soon as I sot eyes on her. She's Mrs. Bates, that used to run the miners' boardin' house at Clear Creek. Made a little stake somehow, she did, an' moved to Denver, and now I hear she's flyin' high. First time I ever see the daughter, but they tell me the old lady had her all that time in one of them convents or seminaries or somethin'."

"We're gettin' kind of personal," said the foreman; "and anyhow it ain't fittin', talkin' over real ladies in a low groggery. Well, boys, the precious metal is still to be extracted on Sacramento Hill, and I'm overdue at the shaft. Here's to 'em!"

Tommy, who had stifled an impulse to break into this group and thrash someone or other, sank down midway of the conversation into a chair by a poker table. John W. Sabin the Great, in love with her! Reported engaged! A black, immovable obstacle seemed to have

settled down between him and that smiling dreamland where columbines are not shaken from their stems.

Yet on the other hand—a miners' boarding house! She, who seemed so exalted in her Eastern clothes, came from origins as humble as his own. All that afternoon and all that sleepless night he was to be working on love's arithmetic, balancing his hopes against his despairs.

CHAPTER III

JUST a stroke before the hour of three, behold Tommy wandering with an assumed nonchalance down Main Street. As when he left the claim that morning, he seemed drawn by a command superior to his will. During the hour before, the balances in love's arithmetic had been only minus quantities; he had sat beside the poker table of the Arizona House imagining picturesque plans for an exit from this sad world. Enlisting in the United States Army to fight the Sioux and being found on the battlefield with a letter addressed to her over his bleeding heart—that seemed, on the whole, the most feasible and satisfying. Nevertheless, he had risen five minutes before the hour, dusted off the shoulders of his new store clothes, flicked the shine of his shoes with a handkerchief, and started forth.

And as he approached the door of the Marlborough it opened to disgorge beauty. His infatuated eyes registered that she was wearing

blue, something which fitted as a bark its tree over her virginal shoulders and breast; that a little foam of feathers tossed above the black film of bang on her forehead; that along her arm—sweetly slender, clad in a long brown glove—lay a folded white parasol from which fluttered a pink ruffle.

For a fateful moment she hesitated at the door. If she turned in the other direction Tommy knew he could never summon the nerve to follow her. But after a second of pretty hesitation she turned toward him. Now—would she speak or would she overlook him? But fate decided that moment also in favor of Tommy, for as she drew near him her eyes, roving about the sights of Main Street, fell on his. They lit with recognition and, "Good afternoon!" she said in a voice reserved and yet friendly. And she seemed to hesitate slightly in her tripping walk.

"Good afternoon," he said, and then, managing to gulp the words out somehow: "Did they last?"

At that she really stopped.

"Yes," she said; "one of them lasted all the way to the hotel. I haven't had a chance

to thank you before. They are very, very beautiful."

Then, with the slow motion of a leaf which sways in the breeze, she turned away as though to resume her walk. But those eyes of hers held that—was it a too great shyness?—which emboldened Tommy to the most daring act of his life.

"Were you walking anywhere?" he asked; and then blushed inwardly at the awkwardness of his approach.

"I was just going out to see the town," she said.

"Would you mind if I went with you—to show it to you?" he gulped.

She seemed to hesitate; then looked full on him with eyes become like pools.

"It will be only a very short walk," she said.

"We might go up to the top of the hill," he suggested, suddenly grown so bold as to astonish himself.

So her high heels made a pleasant tapping and his square-toed shoes a bass clumping beside each other on the board sidewalk. But they were silent for a moment—he because of a rush

of warm, delicious, absolute bliss. She, if he had only known it, was giving him a swift feminine appraisal. He did not look half so romantic in his black ready-made store clothes, his blue necktie drawn through a gold ring, his choker collar, as he had seemed there among the columbines in his brown overalls tucked into high boots, his belt sagging over one of his manly hips, his blue shirt open at the throat. But he still showed that fresh blond complexion tanned to the color of a dark tea rose, those blue eyes as clear as mountain brooks, and that engaging smile. And he had shoulders; and he strode with the gait of a strong man.

"It's my first visit to Carbonado," she said, breaking the somewhat awkward silence and answering the conventional question already forming on his lips.

"You come from the East?" he asked, guiltily concealing his knowledge.

"I do," she replied; "from the effete East. I wasn't born a tenderfoot, but I'm a tenderfoot now. I've just been out of school since April."

"I went to school off and on up to three years

ago," he said. "Finished off with the Union High School at Parkinsville, back in Nebraska."

"What do they teach you in high school?" she asked. "Mathematics and Latin and French and Italian and all that sort of thing, just as they do in a young ladies' seminary? I suppose they excuse the boys from embroidery and ballroom deportment."

"Yes, I guess so," replied Tommy; "except they go light on French, and I never heard of their teaching Dago. I liked Latin," he added.

"So did I," said the girl. "It was my favorite study."

"Mine too!" he said; and they were both silent for a moment, as though amazed by this remarkable coincidence of tastes.

"Were you specially fond of Vergil, Mr. ——" Here she paused.

"Coulter — Thomas J. Coulter," he said promptly. He was becoming as bold as a lion.

"My name is Eleanor Bates," she said as promptly. "Isn't it the strangest thing? We have been just the same as introduced, and by my mother; and yet I didn't even know your name!"

"Sure is queer," answered Tommy. "Say, could you stand algebra?"

"Loathed it!" she replied. "But I liked geometry. All those funny figures looked like little pictures, if you know what I mean."

"So did I like geom," said he. This was becoming more and more astonishing. "But since I got out of school I've pretty near forgotten it. Been too busy with other things."

"What things?" she asked, picking her way delicately over what was intended for a street crossing and was only a dusty, humpy waste.

"Oh, punched cattle, took a turn at freighting, and now I'm grubstaking for gold," he said.

"I know what grubstaking means. My father grubstaked. He's dead long ago, poor old dad, but I was born on a claim in Wyoming."

Why, having recorded all that is necessary of this conversation, should I further intrude into this little stroll? Full of delicious discoveries, like that of the kindred taste for Latin, it took halting steps toward acquaintance; and each new step led to pleasant vistas. Before they rounded that corner by the Arizona House

which led to the residential section of log cabins, board shacks and reënforced tents, they had both discovered that they cared little for square dances but loved to schottish and waltz. By the time they started the ascent of the long grade they had discovered through shy approaches that they both thought that all the religion wasn't in the churches. Halfway up the grade her chatter stopped and she breathed with a delicate sighing; for she was not yet acclimated to that two-mile altitude. As they came to the steepest pull, therefore, he boldly held out his arm and she let her hand rest ever so lightly on his elbow, so that his breath caught also—but not with altitude. As her breathing grew even more difficult they stopped and gathered a bouquet of the little blue and pink daisies which June had sprinkled along the trail. At the summit they sat themselves down on a great rock.

"That's the view," he said.

Below them lay the camp, in the center following a regular geometric plan of streets bordered by log cabins, by board shacks, by clapboarded two-story business blocks. Beyond, log cabins

and reënforced tents straggled irregularly along the curving roads. Beyond that and between lay heaped the fringe of abandoned tin cans which always borders a mining camp. But the distances were all mountain. Though the earth up to the edges of the perpetual snows showed only dull yellows and reds and browns, though the straggling dwarf pine and fir forests offered but little relief of color, the impression somehow was of a heavenly whiteness, of an earth in which nothing could fester or grow impure.

"Charming!" said she. "And don't you just detest people who say you can't understand things because you're too young?"

CHAPTER IV

JOHN W. SABIN and Mrs. Amelia Bates had finished their visit to the rich and flourishing General Longstreet mine, where the lady had been received with the honor due visiting royalty and its guest. Mrs. Bates had even been offered a descent into the shaft, and had declined with thanks. "Wouldn't be any new experience for me," she said.

But she had gone over the new hoisting apparatus with the chief engineer, had been allowed to test the levers, had pronounced it good; she had been presented with a newly dug specimen of wire silver, the pure, precious metal lying like curls of venerable hair in the clefts of its matrix; she had visited the newly installed miners' boarding house, where she had offered valuable and expert suggestions to Sammy the Dutchman, its manager and chef. They had stopped, too, before John W.'s new shack, upon which the painters were just then slapping a first coat of pink and gray, into

which a freighter was just then unloading a set of shiny black-walnut dining-room furniture, a dozen wicker chairs and a gleaming brass bed; and she had mightily commended the taste of her host. Now they were taking one final turn over the hills to see the view; John W., who on the level road had been showing her how they could step, slacked his matched chestnuts down to a walk as he reached a bumpy, rocky stretch, and dug deeper into the intimacies of conversation.

"About your daughter — Miss Nellie," he began after several preliminary gulps; "I suppose you guessed when I asked you both up here that my intentions were serious, sort of."

"Now, Mr. Sabin," said Mrs. Bates, "when an unmarried gentleman makes such advances to an unmarried lady, everybody who knows their way round knows that it ain't just a matter of charity. When I caught you looking at her in Mrs. Barstow's parlor I savvied right away what you meant."

"Well, that makes it a heap easier," said John W., absently flicking a fly from the back of his nigh horse; "a heap easier. You under-

stand a person, you do. It figures out this way. When I was broke, which I mostly was before I struck it in this here General Longstreet, I never wanted to get married. Then, when I was past forty, this come my way."

John W. Sabin made a flash of a three-carat diamond and of a five-carat ruby as he waved his hand over the vista of Carbonado clustering grayly in the hollow below, over the crumpled hills, their bristle of pines broken here and there by dun shaft houses and black dumps, over the smelter smoke polluting here and there the white purity of mountain distances.

"What am I goin' to do with a big house when Carbonado gits to be the capital of the state," John W. went on, "and no first lady of the camp? I didn't need any first lady for the cabins I had frequented and inhabited hitherto, but now — four million dollars my stake in this camp stands me — mines, real estate, everything. All because I believed in this here General Longstreet proposition three years ago and wouldn't let go. And Lord knows how much more it will come to before I'm through!"

"It's been wonderful, astonishing," murmured Mrs. Bates.

As she sat there — her eyes like her daughter's, large and dark but somehow more direct and fiery; her hair like her daughter's black and without one touch of gray; her figure like her daughter's erect though more broadly curved — she made a picture of soft and sympathetic though mature comeliness.

"And you saw my Nellie at Mrs. Barstow's," she put in. "And you thought, 'That's the girl I want!' Not making any more bones about it. I've always believed in coming right out and speaking my mind."

"That's about right. Say, you get things without telling, don't you?" said John W. Sabin, turning upon her the equally penetrating glare of two immense diamond studs and two keen, trail-sharpened eyes. "You'll make an A-1 mother-in-law, you will! Tell you what you do. When we've had our honeymoon seein' things in Yurrup, you're comin' to live with us. I can see by the way you went over that boardin' house that you can give most anybody points on runnin' a big place. And

she's got to be run to the nines. Yes, sir, when this here camp is capital of the state —''

''Well, as for runnin' a boarding house I ought to know,'' broke in Mrs. Bates, abruptly hauling him from the saddle of his hobby. ''I've been perfectly square with you in this affair, Mr. Sabin,'' she added, unaccountably switching the angle of the conversation. ''I could have impersonated a society lady from the East, with a daughter like that. But here's the Lord's truth. Ever since her father died, when she was seven and I was twenty-seven, I've had my nose to the grindstone runnin' miners' boarding houses to make my own little stake for her and give her the right kind of education—just to put her where she'd never have to scratch and scrub like I've always done. Lord knows, I'd be further along than I am, too, if I hadn't went and fell for mining stock. Somehow I always knew that she'd grow up beautiful.

''And she's brainy, too,'' added Mrs. Bates more softly. ''She always won the silver medal in the seminary for English composition. Writes poetry too. Sometimes I think she ought to

take up literature. Some of her writings are the grandest things! Her report cards were a regular joy. And the nicest disposition!"

"She's got all that." said John W., echoing in his tone the softness of his mother-in-law elect. "Could see it the moment I sighted her. I says to myself, 'She's it! she's a looker.' I always liked 'em dark. 'And she's sweet as honey and she's got an education.' I want to git an education myself. 'Tain't too late to learn, I figure. There's a heap of things I want to know about—astronomy, for example."

"And of course you loved her," put in Mrs. Bates.

"Oh, Hell yes!" said John W. Sabin. "Ain't I been tellin' you?"

"You sort of took it for granted a little while ago," put in Mrs. Bates, her voice hardening to a more practical tone, "that she was going to have you."

"Yes, that's the question," replied John W., his manner changing but growing not unduly subdued. "After all, don't look very promising that she wouldn't come out with us this afternoon. How do you think I stand?"

"Oh, as for not coming along," reassured Mrs. Bates, "that was probably only girlish coyness. I was going to warn you that you can't rush things too much with a young girl, any more'n you can with a half-broken filly. If you'd ask her now, you'd only drive her away. A novel I read once had it just right. I can't exactly remember what it was"—Here Mrs. Bates made a pretty pursing between her level brows—"but something in the Waverly Weekly. It said, 'Would you pluck open a bud before its time to bloom?' She must be wooed gently. But she's attracted. A girl's mother knows."

"Well, how do you know?" inquired John W., almost shamefacedly.

"I suppose I oughtn't rightly to tell you this," said Mrs. Bates, "but a mother's duty is first to consider her daughter's good. Well, this morning when I reminded her that you were going to call at noon her back was toward me but she didn't hide her neck.

"She was blushing. Sure as anything, she was blushing."

"Was she?" said John W. Sabin softly. "The cute little cuss!"

CHAPTER V

INTO the family suite of two small rooms at the Marlborough entered Mrs. Bates. Her expression as she bent her gaze upon the back of her daughter Nellie, deliciously, colorfully outlined against the black walnut of the Marlborough's star effect in bureaus, was bright and yet soft. It displayed affection illuminated with both hope and triumph. Nellie started slightly and turned, revealing what she was doing. She had been arranging in the water pitcher a bouquet of pink and blue field daisies.

"Oh, mother—you frightened me for a moment," she said.

Mrs. Bates tripped over to her—though mature in figure she was astonishingly light of step—and dropped a kiss on her daughter's cheek.

"And what has my Nellie been doing this afternoon?" she asked. "Did you take your walk?"

"Yes, mother," replied Nellie with all the demureness in the world. "I walked a little way up the hill."

"And nobody annoyed you—just as Mr. Sabin said?"

"No, mother."

Nellie at this point seemed to note something imperfect with the arrangement of the daisies. She took a step to the bureau and plunged her pink fingers among the blossoms, before she went on.

"That young man whom we met when we were in the stage—the one who gave us the columbines—passed and asked me if there was anything he could do to show me the town."

The face of Mrs. Bates, turned upon the picture by the bureau, played in three winks of an eyelash a whole drama. From surprise her expression shaded to suspicion, from suspicion to anger; then, as if by control of will and reason, it ironed out to its usual good humor, tinged perhaps by a shade of prim disapproval.

"But, Nellie," she said, "you've never been introduced to him."

"I thought of that, mother," said Nellie in her own primmest tone, "but after all I felt that I'd really been introduced by you. He only

talked to me a little. Then I gathered these flowers and came home."

"A young lady can't be too reserved," said Mrs. Bates.

"So they told me at the seminary," replied Nellie. "How did you like the mines?"

But Mrs. Bates eluded this transparent attempt to change the subject.

"What sort of young man is he?" she asked, speaking with apparent indifference as she drew off her gloves.

"Oh, he seems very well educated," replied Nellie. "Of course I didn't have any conversation with him to speak of."

"What does he do?"

Mrs. Bates had now stepped up to the mirror and with apparent absorption was patting a loose friz into place.

"What did he say? Oh, yes—he says he grubstakes!"

"H'm," said Mrs. Bates; but so lightly that it might have been taken for an incipient cough. Then she changed the subject.

"Well, it's a pity you missed it; but Mr. Sabin says he'll take us out again to-morrow

or day after. Mining's improved a lot since the days I knew it. They wanted to take me down the shaft and I was dying to go, but you look such a frump in the things they put on you. Mr. Sabin treated me like a prince. He has a fine nature. He's the youngest man of his age I ever knew."

She paused as though for a response, but none came. She had by now unhooked her basque, which after the fashion of the times confined her figure like a vise.

"Whew! That's a relief!" she sighed.

She glanced then at the alarm clock on the mantel, and her expression grew practical, executive.

"We're going to have supper to-morrow at the new Maison Riche Restaurant with Mr. Sabin," she said, "and I for one hope they don't give us canned stuff. My mouth tastes of solder already! To-night, thank goodness, we can catch a little sleep. I think we'd better go as we are—you might put on a fresh jabot, though. Oh," she added, "how did your ball gown come out of the trunk? I didn't have time to look it over this morning. It it's wrin-

kled I don't know how I'll ever get it pressed up here."

"It's only a little wrinkled, mother," responded Nellie.

She crossed to the tiny closet, unhung and brought forth a huge foam of white and pink.

"Lay it out on the table," said Mrs. Bates.

The pink and white settled down on the Turkey red of the tablecloth. Mrs. Bates inspected the steels of the tight bodice, the lace about the corsage, with a critical eye; but she spoke of other things.

"Did that young man ask to call?" she inquired.

Nellie's face, turned on the downcast face of her mother, was flicked by a sudden expression of annoyance. She made a quick impatient outward gesture. Then she let out a little "Oh!" and stood looking blankly down on a calamity.

In their absorption with their unexpressed thoughts both ladies failed to notice that a bottle of ink stood on the Turkey-red tablecloth. In the sweep of her sudden gesture Nellie had struck it. The bottle bounced on the pink foam of the skirt; the cork flew out; what had been

unbroken pink silk was now an irregular pattern of pink and black.

Mrs. Bates sprang to action; seizing a towel from the rack she began to sop up the ink. This was a futile measure, as she realized after an instant. Her fingers dripping with black, she stood facing her daughter.

"Well, of all the awkwardness!" she blazed; and then, in her most pathetic tone: "Oh, however did you come to do it?"

"Oh, mother, I'm so sorry!" said Nellie, on the verge of tears.

"Well, sorry don't help now!" said Mrs. Bates. "Let's see what's happened."

Bodice and skirt had completely escaped. The great gathered pile of pink silk which tossed over the bustle had sustained all the damage; it was a ruin, past all hope of cleaning.

"Seven yards of silk, double width," mused Mrs. Bates. "Let's see if there's any machine sewing. No, only gathered. I could do it all with a needle."

"Oh, mother, I'll do it!" volunteered Nellie. "My pretty dress!"

The tears started in her eyes, suggesting that

Nellie was still in that stage of womanhood when a girl is capable of relapsing and playing with dolls.

"Silk here will be ten dollars a yard at the least," Mrs. Bates said, as though thinking aloud. "But they must have those standard shades."

She paused, lightly tapping a white front tooth with a spotted finger. Then, unaccountable, she turned, went into her own room. Nellie, dumbly fingering the wreckage of what had been her ball gown, wondered vaguely why her mother turned the key in the lock.

Mrs. Bates, alone, had drawn a buckskin bag from under her skirt, had shaken its golden contents out on her bureau, was counting them.

CHAPTER VI

THE ladies of the Bates family supped alone that evening. It was lodge night for John W. Sabin, and in his capacity of Grand Masterful Ruler he could not shirk this masculine duty, even for the soft indulgences of budding love. Tommy, having with difficulty restrained his eagerness, carefully managed things so as to enter after the ladies were seated. Vaguely he hoped for the unattainable—a place with them at that special table of John W. Sabin. However, as he passed them, making a prearranged detour, Mrs. Bates merely nodded stiffly, and Nellie the divine gave him only her most conventional seminary bow. He seated himself in his own place, as predetermined by the head waitress at dinner time. Then he had sat blessedly, blissfully alone. Tonight he found at his table a traveling salesman for paints, varnishes, wall paper and window glass, who presented his card at once, and wanted to talk about the business opportunities

of the camp. Tommy answered him politely but in monosyllables, his eyes roving toward the table at his right. The salesman caught one of these glances, followed it.

"She's certainly a beaut!" he said.

Whereupon Tommy fell into a grouchy silence, refusing answer to all questions, so that the salesman, with a grunt, settled down to perusal of the Evening Clarion. Unembarrassed now by that clacking in his ears, Tommy could give his attention to the conversation at the next table, could eavesdrop as he had done at luncheon. But they were speaking in low tones. Small wonder; the advent of these two exemplars of Eastern fashion had been in that camp —very short on the kind of women one is supposed to acknowledge openly, still more short on beauty and fashion—a suppressed but exciting sensation. Not a motion they made but drew the searching, furtive scrutiny of two score masculine eyes. And it was not until the biscuit shooter was approaching with the dried-apple pie that Tommy got anything meant distinctly for him. He had just dared one of his veiled glances; and the girl, who had been avoiding his

direct looks while conveying somehow that she was conscious of them, now looked him a moment in the eye.

And he heard her say, "While you're out, mother, I'll just read in the ladies' parlor. Somehow, I hate our room. That gray wall paper depresses me."

When, half an hour later, Mrs. Bates left the hotel she wore an inconspicuous raincoat. Though twilight still danced with rosy feet among the peaks, the after-supper life of the camp had begun. Before the Black Diamond Vaudeville Theater a band was emitting, with long mournful wails of the saxophone, Silver Threads Among the Gold. The last note faded into a silence, broken a moment later by the band of the Little Casino, far down the street, attacking the lively strains of Nancy Lee. The big music box of the Arizona House bar cut into the rests with the metallic notes of Over the Garden Wall. The board sidewalks were already full, so that pedestrians in a hurry were taking to the unpaved wagonway between. Heavy boots made a clanking upon the boards, a bass note to the tenor of a thousand cheerful

voices. Chips were already clattering, roulette wheels whirring, behind the swinging doors of the gambling halls. Far down the street intent groups clustered about tables set upon the edges of the sidewalk, where professional gamblers, newly arrived, were calling out the allurements of three-card monte, wheel of fortune or even faro.

Mrs. Bates crossed the street, attracting more polite curious attention than would, on Fifth Avenue, a reigning and favorite actress. She was quietly reconnoitering, while seeming merely to glance curiously over the crowd. That establishment which she had marked with her shrewd, observing eye as she and John W. Sabin started on their drive, lay just across the street from the districts of swinging doors and loud music. To enter it from Main Street, and at that hour, would be a proceeding so open that she might as well publish it in the Evening Clarion. Mrs. Bates, as she wandered, assembled in her mind her lore of mining camps. There must be a ladies' entrance somewhere at the rear.

At this moment a newly arrived tenderfoot,

unused to the combined effects of red-eye whisky and altitude, came whooping down the street, challenging the world to fight. Laughter rippled before and behind him. The tenderfoot balanced himself, drew his side arm and flourished it. Half a dozen sudden Westerners sprang from the crowd on the instant, fell upon him, disarmed him. The laughter increased to a continuous roar.

Mrs. Bates, standing now on a street corner, reflected that this was the appointed moment when she would be free from observation. Swiftly but cannily she turned into the shades of Sixth Street. The town was as yet without street lights; hence its hold-up record. Main Street depended for night illuminations upon the glare from the uncurtained windows of dance halls, concert halls and saloons. Galena Avenue, which ran past the new Methodist Church, would in another half hour become blacker than a pocket; and the Farren gang of footpads, undeterred by the lynching last month, would be plying their trade. But now it was possible to pick one's way in the twilight.

Mrs. Bates bent her course toward Eighth

Street, turned, stumbling along the worn wooden sidewalk close to the shadows of the buildings, toward Main Street. She paused before a plain board sign, scrutinized it in the twilight, and nodded as with mental satisfaction. "Ladies' Entrance," it read. She darted into the door beneath the sign, groped down an undecorated hallway toward a quadrangle of light which outlined a carelessly hung door. As she opened it her expression gave another dart of satisfaction. She had not until that moment been quite certain; "Ladies' Entrance" might mean the way to most embarrassing places. But she was in a little square room, papered with newspapers and furnished with a long counter of unplaned boards. Behind it were shelves heaped with packages of miscellaneous sizes wrapped in newspapers. From hooks along the top row of shelves hung a row of violins, guitars, accordions and other silent and battered musical instruments. Across the farther end of the room hung clothing, both male and female. A small showcase on the counter threw back the glitter of diamonds against the beams from the reflector of the big oil lamp.

A small man with black curly hair topped by a skull cap was asking, "What can I do for you, madam?"

Mrs. Bates seemed to hesitate.

"I suppose business here is strictly confidential?" she asked.

"Strictly," said the little man. "We ask no questions and tell no tales."

Mrs. Bates opened her purse. "What do I get on that?"

The little man took the diamond ring she offered, screwed a glass into his accustomed eye, and asked, "Pawn or sale?"

"Pawn, of course," said Mrs. Bates. "And I'll tell you now, the last time I hung it up it brought three fifty."

"Give you three hundred," said the man. "Diamonds is going down."

"That's highway robbery," began Mrs. Bates. "That's—"

Just then a heavy step sounded on the rough floor of the passage without. Mrs. Bates stood frozen to immobility. But this intruder, whoever he was, seemed merely to be making for another door farther up the passage. Hinges

creaked; there was a slamming; the footsteps ceased. Mrs. Bates' color began to return.

She spoke instantly: "All right. Give me the money and the ticket—quick!"

When Mrs. Bates returned to the Marlborough she was carrying a large parcel wrapped in brown paper. The damaged ball gown by now lay on the table in her own room. She tore open a corner of the paper parcel, matched carefully, in the light of the oil lamp, the color of the fabric within and that of the gathered silk over the bustle of the dress. She nodded with satisfaction, opened her sewing case and prepared for work. Mrs. Bates, as she said, had been frank with John W. Sabin—as far as she went. The most important thing she held back from him was that in this dear and desperate game of hers she was playing now her last stake.

In the meantime Tommy had conducted a quiet reconnoitering expedition of his own. The ladies' parlor of the Marlborough lay just behind the main lobby. In that two-story, board-and-shingle structure, already gaping at the

joints with the warping of its hastily sawn, unseasoned timbers, this little apartment had been laid out as one of the ground-floor bedrooms. John W. Sabin had ruled, however, that pending the arrival of the railroad and the erection of a modern brick hotel, the temporary Marlborough should have "all the dog there is"; hence the ladies' parlor, where such real ladies as visited the camp, before its transformation into a metropolis and the state capital, could receive their guests in conventionality and state.

In its decorations this apartment had been especially favored. It had a Brussels carpet. Sometimes when the weather was fresh the mountain wind came through the warping ill-matched boards of the floor and bulged out this piece of decoration like a sail at sea. A set of white Nottingham curtains, very stiffly starched though by now a little dusty, filtered away the more garish mountain light from the three gilded chairs finished off by bows of pink ribbon. There were two sofas. One was of plain black haircloth, the other, gilded like the chairs, was upholstered in pink-and-gold rep as tightly as a pincushion, so that it seemed always about

to burst off its gilded buttons. Down upon this scene looked a chromo of Custer's Last Charge, set in a heavy gilt frame, covered against the flies with white mosquito netting. Adding their touch of feminine refinement and sentiment were two matched colored engravings of childish innocence, entitled Wide Awake and Fast Asleep. A walnut center table, its heavy red-and-brown cloth dropping little wool balls, held a stereopticon with views of the Rockies and a gilt-edged book entitled Museum of Antiquity. In the corner stood a base-burner stove, now cold, trimmed with nickel most elegantly sculptured, topped with a bronze knight in full armor.

Tommy, scouting out the approaches like a good frontiersman, observed that the back stairway communicated with that hallway from which opened the ladies' parlor. He shrewdly guessed that his lady of the columbines would avoid publicity by taking that route. So he established himself in the lobby, where he loafed away an interminable half hour, until Mrs. Bates crossed the space between the main stairway and the front door and disappeared. For another eternal interval—at least three

minutes—he restrained himself, then quietly crossed the lobby, sidled through the rear entrance and furtively took his way past the open door of the ladies' parlor.

He was not disappointed. The full beam from the reflector of an oil lamp in the hall made lights on the sheen of her black hair. She sat on the gilded sofa, fully revealed in the spotlight of the reflector—sat with her hands folded on the paper-covered novel in her lap. She was wearing something which made him feel that she was clad in spun sugar candy; a woman would have described it as a dotted-Swiss mull with salmon trimmings and sash. She was not reading; her eyes met his frankly. He had been trying to hit upon some device for invading her privacy, had mixed up his mind between six or seven inventions, and found himself at this, the moment of action, tongue-tied. So without a word he entered, did it as simply and naturally as though he had come by appointment. He stood at the height of his full five feet eleven, looking down on her with eyes soft yet intent. And an expression he did not at the moment fathom flicked across her dark eyes. It held a

suggestion of fear, a shade of panic. Then she dropped her gaze.

"Sit down," she said; and her voice was very low.

Tommy let himself down delicately on one of the frail, gilded, beribboned chairs, as though he expected it to break beneath him. To his surprise, it held. When she spoke again her voice rang with its natural music.

"Tell me about yourself!" she ordered.

"Well," replied Tommy, "I guess I told you this afternoon about all there was to tell. Cow-punching, freighting, and now grubstaking—"

"Not that," she said with a pretty little outward gesture of her hand; "though I'm sure you could tell me of some wonderful adventures. But what you want to do—what you'd like to be!"

The life into which she was inquiring had been passed not in contemplation and self-analysis but in action; and Tommy hesitated on his answer.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'd like to make my stake, of course—and the Big Hope is a likely prospect. And then I'd fix up mother—she lives

with my married sister in Iowa—and then I guess I'd like to travel, see the East and Europe. But I wouldn't want to stay in the East," he added hastily. "Out here growing up with the country is good enough for me."

"I like that in you," she said, turning the subject unaccountably. "It must be wonderful to be free—to go where you wish—to have no bonds!"

She had leaned forward with the intensity of some new sudden emotion, clasped her slender hands in her lap.

"Yes, I suppose I can do pretty much as I want," said Tommy; then, perceiving somehow that he was on the wrong track, he spoke with his own simple directness: "Aren't you free?" he asked.

"Is a woman ever free?" she countered. "Oh, it would be wonderful," she went on, "to burst these bonds, to live out here where I was born—simply. Do you know what I was thinking to-night? I envied the little waitress at our table. She is working for a living. She is doing as she pleases—so far as woman ever does." She stopped here.

"But what is holding you?" said Tommy with his own simple directness. "Can I help?"

"I'm afraid no one can help," she said, "but it's good of you to offer. There now, I've said enough about myself. Tell me about your days as a cowboy. I don't know anything about the cattle range. Were you ever in a stampede?"

Her expression, her pose, were animated again. And Tommy, with that sense of direct vivid narrative universal in the old West, plunged at once into the tale of the time when a thunderclap set 'em off in the White River country. But as the tale proceeded toward its climax—wherein he was caught in a rocky gut, with the cattle piling up against him and his bronco—he began to run down and to lose interest from lack of interest on the part of his auditor. The light had been gradually going from her eyes. Now they met his no more; they searched the shadows under the oil lamp in the hall. He stopped his narrative abruptly.

"Say, is there anything I can do to help you?" he interrupted himself. "Anything?" He repeated this last word with all the emphasis he could command.

She rose at this, the cloud of gathered muslin above her bustle seeming to whisper daintiness as she went to the window, parted the lace curtains and looked out on the scattered lights dotting the twilight. He rose, too, and was beginning as though drawn by a magnet a step toward her when she turned back, seated herself with the pretty rustling and flutter of a full branch settling in the wind. But he remained for a time standing.

"To think," she said, "that I've known you less than a day and I am talking to you like this. It's a proof of my desperation, I suppose. What right have I?"

"You've got every right there is," said he.

And he might have said more had she not cut in immediately with: "No one has a right to thrust his troubles on a stranger."

"I wonder if we are strangers," he said.

"I wonder," said she. But the light glance with which she said this lasted only a moment, and again the shade fell upon her expression. "Suppose," she said, low and deliberately, "that I told you that in this next week—and I shall be in Carbonado only a week—I am going

to face the climax of my life—a very hopeless climax too. For there is only one way out, I imagine."

"There are always two ways out of everything."

"Yes, one can always kill herself."

"You don't mean that!"

"No, of course I don't mean that. It's one of the things you just think about and don't do. I hope I'm not a coward. I can face it, and when it's done people will say I'm lucky."

Tommy cleared his throat inelegantly before he clove nearer to the heart of the subject.

"It's a case of—of thinking about—getting married, I guess."

"You have wonderful intuitions, don't you? Yes, and if I could only do it of my own free choice! If I could say I will sacrifice myself because it is my duty! But to be told I must!"

The idea that flashed into Tommy's sudden young Western mind at that moment was so overwhelming in its daring, its rapture and its perils that it sent the blood rushing to his head, blinded his vision, tied his tongue. Before he could give it any more expression than showed

in his countenance the girl's own countenance had changed. Some panic, some dart of fear, had opened her lips so that her white teeth flashed in the lamplight, had widened her eyes. And she rose as easily and as swiftly as a bird taking flight.

"I must go!" she said. "Even this is disobedient. No one ever uses that word 'obedient' to you—but I ——" She gathered up her book.

But Tommy, though he had lost the moment of splendid action, retained a little of the boldness that had so suddenly ebbed and flowed over his spirit.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked, taking a step nearer. She retreated her own step before answering.

"I don't know. Every moment to-morrow is taken up—I live my life by a program—I'm watched all the time—perhaps the opportunity will come ——"

"I want to help," he said. "I've got to help. I ——"

But whatever words he was going to say were drowned by her interrupting, "Thank you —oh, thank you!"

And she was gone, leaving a faint, indefinably delicious fragrance to flavor the scent of new-sawn pine given forth by the Marlborough's unseasoned timbers.

CHAPTER VII

ACTION is the remedy for all sickness of the spirit in youth. To Tommy, mooning alone next evening in the Arizona House after a day blessed by no more than a glimpse at his lady of the columbines, action arrived on the wings of salvation. The bell in the new pine steeple of the Methodist Church suddenly began to peal, not dolefully as for services, but with the quick staccato rhythm of a tocsin. This, the only bell in camp, hauled over the peaks by ten mules, installed with appropriate ceremony, did double duty as a fire alarm.

The Arizona House voided itself instantly to Main Street. Down toward the hill a blaze of garish light spotted the dead blackness of a moonless mountain sky. It illuminated the bobbing heads of all Carbonado, pouring out from whatever diversion it was pursuing, to join in the excitement. Spruce gamblers in black hats ran beside miners in blue overalls; women

dressed in the modesty of bonnet, shawl and mantle beside women in short pink skirts or in Mother Hubbard wrappers.

Tommy, sprinting forward ahead of the crowd, heard someone calling, "It's Sipple's store!" This, he reflected as he ran, would be a big loss to the camp; Sipple's, painfully stocked by freight wagon, was the one dry-goods store as well as the great general grocery for Carbonado.

"It's next to Sipple's!" came another voice. At that moment he was aware of a gong clamoring behind him, and stopped to watch the majestic, exciting passage of John W. Sabin Hose No. 1. It was as yet a hose team only by interpretation of hope. The town was waiting the arrival of the railroad to put in its long-projected water mains. For the present tank wagons plied between Bear Creek and the camp, doling out domestic supplies into whisky barrels. But, omitting the hose, the outfit was complete; John W. Sabin had seen to that. The eight-man team sprinted in red leather helmets and red shirts, Sandy McNutt, champion runner of the camp, loping on before. The nozzleman,

Three Cabins Were Roaring Furnaces. Another Was Breaking Into Flames.
The Crowd Fell Open at the Clang of the Gong

running in good order behind the outfit, had as yet no machinery for plying his art; he was concerning himself with keeping the leather buckets on their hooks and in dodging the water which slopped from the barrel occupying that place where a reel of hose was some day to stand.

Beside the team ran John W. Sabin himself, puffing stertorously, but making a fine effort for a middle-aged man. He had not found time to put on a red shirt, but he wore the splendid red-and-gold helmet of authority, and he waved a bronze speaking trumpet. Like outriders ran Jim Dugald, city marshal, and two deputies, their black, corded G. A. R. hats marking their authority. They were waving their formidable forty-five-caliber revolvers as a warning to all and sundry who would interfere with the fire department.

Tommy did not wait to see the passage of the distanced John W. Sabin Hook and Ladder No. 2, whose gong was sounding far down the street. He fell in beside the hose company, sprinting with them. He could see the situation now. Three cabins, only a vacant lot away from Sipple's, were roaring furnaces. Another

just beyond was breaking into flames. The crowd before the fire fell open at the clang of the gong and the menacing shouts of Jim Dugald; the hose team curved to a graceful stop, and its puffing steeds set themselves to unstrip buckets.

"You can't save them cabins," roared John W. Sabin. "Wind's shifting — bucket chain, boys, and rustle! Root hog or die!"

The hook and ladder had now curved into position. As John W. Sabin said, the wind was shifting. Sparks began to batter upon the dry inflammable clapboards of the big store. Up went the ladders; up clambered the bucket chain. A shout from the crowd hailed the arrival of a water wagon, another that of an express wagon laden with two slopping whiskey barrels.

John W. Sabin mounted the lowest rung of a ladder.

"Water — all the water ye can git!" he bellowed through his speaking trumpet at the crowd. In buckets, in more whisky barrels, in pans, the water began to arrive.

The red-hatted firemen monopolized the posi-

tions on the ladders and roof and at the windows of Sipple's store. Certain plain citizens not in uniform rushed forward to help; they were driven back by the menace and majesty of Marshal Jim Dugald, established at the foot of the ladder. Tommy, who had been among these, joined a group of plain ununiformed miners filling and passing buckets from the whisky barrels, and set violently to work. As they puffed, grunted and wielded buckets the miners gossiped among themselves.

"Started in Old Calamity's cabin, I hear," said one of them. "He was biled proper before supper. Bet he kicked over his coal-oil lamp."

"Jest as well shet of him," commented another. Then he paused, his bucket poised at the edge of the whisky barrel. "Say, did he git out? Has anybody seen Old Calamity?"

"Bet you he didn't," said Tommy, thrilled by the prospect of action, and already bored with passing buckets. "Let's look!"

Forthwith that squad dropped buckets and pans, to be replaced by eager volunteers from the crowd. Tommy, sprinting out before, rounded the burning cabins, the middle one in

the group of three now fallen to a bright furnace. The shift of wind, which was blowing sparks in showers against Sipple's store, made them approachable from the rear. Tommy vaulted the palisade fence, still unburned, which set off the yard of the cabin at the right, approached as near as the heat allowed. Certainly, he reflected, if that notorious town drunkard, Old Calamity—so called because of his loud pessimism when drunk—were in there now, it was an end of him.

Tommy by now had lost his companions; he was turning back to find them when he nearly stumbled over what appeared like a bundle of rags against the fence. A rising spurt of the flame revealed the bloated unshaven face and bald head of Old Calamity, lying inert. Tommy stooped down. It was impossible, what with the crackling of the fires and the roar of the crowd, to find if he were still breathing, but something about the feeling of him told Tommy's intuitions that he was alive.

Just then the cutting, uncertain wind of the peaks veered again; sparks preceded by choking smoke began to blow in his direction. Where-

upon Tommy kicked open the door of the palisade fence, gathered in his arms the unsavory upper parts of Old Calamity, and half carried, half dragged him round the fire toward the crowd, where someone more expert on smoke asphyxiation than he might attend to the case. As he made his last turn the wind gave another whirl and shift. Smoke and sparks blew across his course for a moment, so that he emerged coughing.

In the meantime, Mrs. Bates and her daughter had been dining with John W. Sabin at the newly opened Maison Riche Restaurant, on Main Street—dining in exceptional state and luxury. A wagonload of canned cove oysters had arrived in camp that afternoon; the first fruits of this consignment came to John W.'s special table. Moreover, Steinlen, the butcher, had just cut up a cinnamon bear, killed a day before at Copper Lake. The choicest steaks had been sent to John W. with Mr. Steinlen's compliments. Finishing off this luxurious feast was cherry pie, made, as John W. particularly explained, not from canned cherries but from a box of fresh

ones—the genuine California product—the first ever to arrive in camp.

They were lingering over the cherry pie when the stern tocsin of the Methodist Church sounded the alarm.

Waiting only to assure the ladies that he would see them after the fire was out, and to put them in the care of Bill Duffy, the proprietor, John W. Sabin had sped to the firehouse and action. But every moment the clamor grew louder and louder, the shuffling, trampling feet outside sounded a more rapid beat.

An excited voice from the crowd came in at the open door, where the waiters were gathered: "The hull camp's goin'!"

At this Mrs. Bates could restrain her human curiosity no longer.

"Come on, Nellie!" she said, and reached for her mantle.

They would have been blocked by the crowd a hundred yards away had not Deputy Marshal Simpson spied them. He was thinning out the rear ranks, and he was not unaware of the favor of these two in the eyes of John W. Sabin. He took them in hand, cleared majestically a way

for them, set them in the front ranks as near the smoke and flame as safety allowed, and just where they could behold the expert work of the fire companies. Being only a male man, with the gallantry but also the stupid inconsiderateness of that species, he failed to notice their environment. He had dropped them down, in fact, near a group of three other women, hatless, painted, the youngest in pink skirts, high-heeled pink shoes and very low corsage; the others in shawls thrown over fat shoulders and Mother Hubbard wrappers. At the moment they were silent, watching fire and firemen with eyes that showed hard amusement. However, Mrs. Bates being experienced in mining camps, found herself dreading the time when conversation should begin.

"This way, dear," she began, and was already edging her charge out from the forefront of the crowd when a louder clamor of voices heralded a new excitement.

The two ladies turned toward that point indicated by all eyes and gestures. And this is what they saw: Out of the smoke screen before them staggered a man, young and stalwart, as

his motion showed. He was carrying in his arms another man, whose feet dragged and bumped as they proceeded, whose head lolled weakly, inertly, against his shoulder. He seemed, as he emerged into view, to stagger with the weight, and he emitted a choking cough. At a point not ten yards away from the little pointed feet of the Bates ladies he stopped as though exhausted, dropped his man, who flopped like a half-filled sack, and stood coughing violently again. That was the affair as the crowd saw it, including Nellie Bates. At the moment when the young rescuer stood erect and faced them she emitted a little "Oh" which had more in it than fright and surprise. Her mother turned quickly upon her.

"It's all right, Nellie"; and then: "Oh, the ninnies!" For the crowd, having taken in this tableau, was running toward the group so dramatically outlined against the flames, was pressing and shoving so that the ladies involuntarily went forward. But almost as soon John W. Sabin was on the scene; he and Jim Dugald, the law in Carbonado, had pushed a way and were

yelling in commanding tones, "Get back—all of you—get back!"

The crowd gave way.

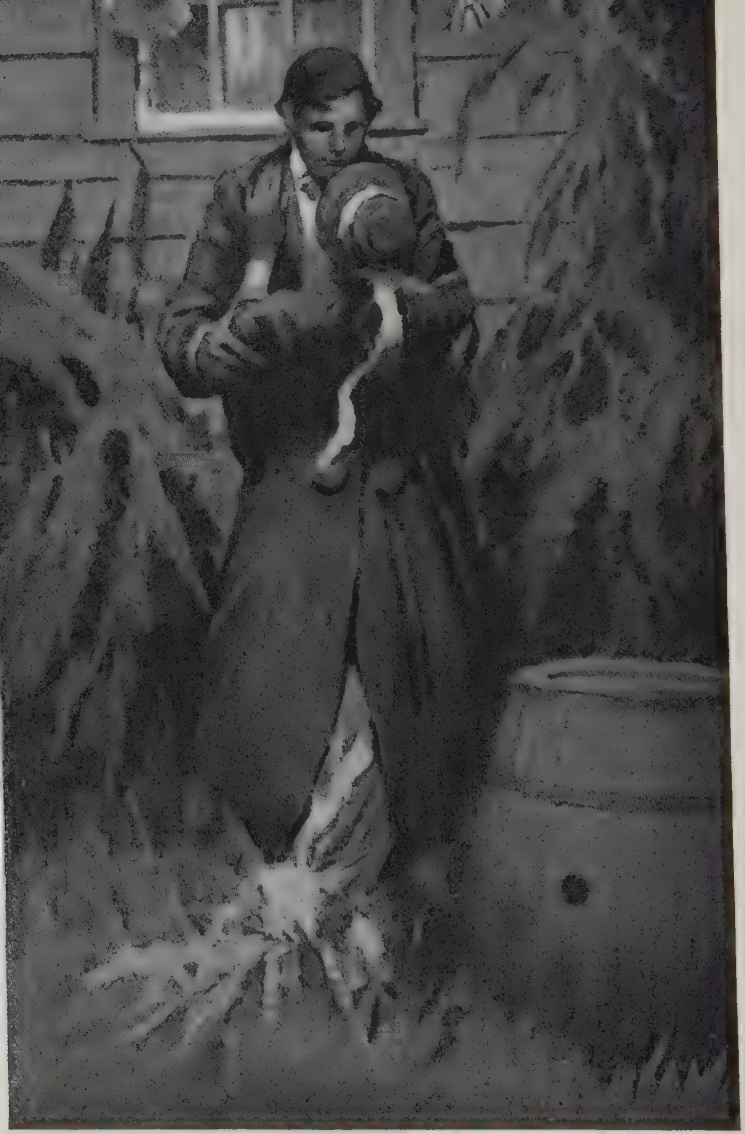
"Is there a doctor present?" came in John W.'s stentorian tones from the speaking trumpet.

No answer for a moment, then shouts for Doctor Jones; then a voice bawling, "I seen him start for Pine Gulch!"

"Never mind a doctor—I know what to do," said a confident feminine voice at the elbow of John W. Sabin. He turned, to behold Mrs. Bates, who had already thrown off her mantle, was tossing it and her long gloves to Nellie. She leaned over Old Calamity, John W. and Jim Dugald pushing, commanding, threatening the crowd back from her. By this time John W. was plainly second in command; Mrs. Bates somehow dominated the drama. With surprising deftness she turned the victim over on his back.

"That's right," she said as she worked; "keep 'em off us and give him air."

She felt for the pulse of the inert Old Calam-



Without Effort of His Will — for Will Had Nothing
to Do With it — His Arm Went Round Her

village magnate and the minion of the law, gave a thrust forward, coming between them and the group on the ground. Unresisting, they were forced still farther and farther back. He had caught her under the arm, supporting her against this rough jostling. As the outskirts of the crowd, composed of the very young and excited, pushed past them, he found her shrinking close to him.

Without effort of his will—for will had nothing to do with it—his arm went round her. So they found themselves on that side of Sipple's store which stood out of danger, and about which the blaze threw a black shadow. Now, his arm still supporting her, she looked up at him in the shadow.

"Oh, are you hurt?" she asked in a tender whisper. "You coughed so!"

"Not a bit," he managed to say through the panting of his breath and the beating of his heart. "It wasn't anything—just carried him round the house."

"Nothing?" she said, very low and sweet. "Nothing—to break through the flames and rescue an old man? Heroes are always modest."

He was going to tell her the truth, such being his instinct at all times. If he did not it was because a thing most unaccountable happened to him, so that all the rest of his life he was to marvel at it. The little truth he was going to tell surged and merged into a greater truth —into truth universal, wherein soul holds back nothing from soul. For the swift beating in his blood had risen to an unbearable speed; his vision swam in red; and a very ecstasy of daring made a kind of brilliant warmth in all his being.

"God—I love you—how I love you—I love you!"

And with this explosion the hot flood in his veins seemed to recede, to end as suddenly as it had begun. Into its place began to creep a chilling sense that he had spoiled everything. Yet she, half supporting herself on his arm, did not withdraw herself, did not even sway backward from him.

And now she spoke on the intake of a long sigh: "Then kiss me, my hero—kiss me!"

They came presently out of the shadows, flushed and with downcast looks; she, indeed, controlling a quivering of all her limbs, he with

eyes that seemed to have looked on miracles. For no sooner had they kissed than she had drawn back, saying, "People must not find us this way." But they had kissed again and murmured wild nothings before they came out into the light.

The burning cabins had settled down now from a pink glow to a deep red. The firemen, having wet down the roof and the exposed side of Sipple's store, were simply killing occasional sparks. The crowd, its first excitement passed, was fast thinning out and returning to the various lurid diversions of night life. But one group remained, clustered about Sam Haney's express wagon. John W. Sabin, his chief's hat on the back of his head, was helping Jim Dugald to deposit Old Calamity in the wagon bed. Mrs. Bates, still plainly in command of the operation, was covering him with gunny sacks which Sam Haney employed to keep boxes from bumping, was tucking him in with a touch almost motherly.

"There—roll him into a bunk and let him sleep it off," she was saying. "It was mostly plain, paralyzed drunk, I'm certain of that, but

maybe he took aboard a little smoke. Where's Nellie? Oh, yes, one of you lay for the doctor and have him look this drunk over when he gets back. His heart's working all right, but you can't make too certain."

Nellie was so far away at this moment that she could not hear her mother's call, but she did see the raising of the figure, the turn of the head and the gesture that accompanied it.

"I must go now—dear—dearest—columbine boy!" she whispered.

He was controlling his voice to ask when he might see her again; but she anticipated that.

"Come to the Firemen's Ball to-morrow night," she said. "Remember, I will save you dances—good night, love!"

He watched her tripping at a run through the flickering shadows, seeming to move as lightly and as mystically as they. The express wagon was just rumbling away when she reached her mother's side.

"Well, wherever have you been, Nellie?" she asked a little sharply; and then her tone softened as John W. Sabin turned toward her. "Give me my mantle, dear! Br-r! These nights

are chilly! I've got to go back to the hotel, Mr. Sabin, and clean up. My hands smell like a saloon."

John W. Sabin regarded the young girl with a smile that softened the outlines of his sea-lion mustache, the cinder-blackened creases of his face.

"I'll tell you one thing, Miss Nellie Bates," he said, "you've got a mother to be proud of! For a cinch you have. A natural-born doctor, that's what she is. Never saw anything handled better."

"Well," said Mrs. Bates modestly as she settled into her mantle and patted to place a strayed friz of her black hair, "I ought to know how to handle drunks. Had enough experience." She stopped there, as though reflecting that others were listening, and that she was marring her picture of the perfect lady in a rough camp. "If you'll accompany us to the hotel, Mr. Sabin," she added, falling back gracefully into the pose, "we'll rejoin you after I've made myself tidy."

As they passed down the street Nellie fell a little behind her mother and searched with her

eyes. He was still standing where she had left him. For an instant a flash of the dying flame lit up his face. He was watching her, seeming to look over the head of a little man who stood writing on a paper pad. The light died out and she dared no longer look back.

Tommy was, in fact, sustaining for the first time in his life the annoyance of being interviewed for the public press. Solly Watrous, city editor and entire reportorial corps for the Carbonado Clarion, had been yearning for a new local sensation. Murders had become too tragically common. Though he splashed their gory details all over his front page he did it by now perfunctorily. As for holdups, they were so many and so much alike in detail that he lumped them off in one-line items under the heading The Footpad Record. The lynching a month before had given some play to his art; since then nothing had happened so promising as this fire and the dazzling rescue, which he had seen with his own eyes. Waiting only to assure himself that Old Calamity was going to pull through, and to make notes on the work of Mrs. Bates, he had started a search for the unknown

hero, whom presently he found standing in the shadow of Sipple's regarding the dying fire.

"I want your name and address, young fellow," he said, poising a pencil above a wad of folded paper. "You're the man who rescued Old Calamity."

"I didn't do anything special," said Tommy rather absently, for his eyes were wandering ever the head of Solly Watrous to the group round the express wagon.

"Fine!" said Solly, making notes furiously. "It's your play to say that. How did you get to him? Beat in the flaming back door? And did you remember that the way to get through a fire is to crawl close to the ground?"

For the second time in ten minutes Tommy walked up close to the truth, and then walked away. The passage of the emotional storm within him, the arrival of a great unexpected happiness, had left a furious mental whirl, wherein he could think of nothing clearly and consecutively. It flashed into his mind that he had let her believe this, that he would be somehow disloyal to her if he told the truth first to anyone else.

"Yes—sort of," he faltered, feeling that he must say something.

"Where did you find him? On his bunk?" asked Solly. This was just the moment when Mr. Sabin and the Bates ladies passed, when Tommy and Nellie exchanged glances. So Tommy had not even heard the question. Solly repeated it.

"I s'pose so," replied Tommy abstractedly.

"Found him on his bunk, overcome with the smoke which presaged the hellish flames," wrote Solly, giving play to his art even while taking notes. " Hero seemed dazed," he jotted down as an afterthought. "And I suppose you paused even then to put your hand over his heart and ascertain if rescue was too late?"

"Well, I knew he was alive," faltered Tommy.

"All right," said Solly. "Fine! Now what's your name and your job?"

"Thomas J. Coulter," said Tommy. "I—I work for a mine."

Suddenly the realization of what this was all about struck him, chilled him to the bone.

"Say, what are you doing?" he asked, wak-

ing up at last from the love trance. "You aren't going to put this stuff in the papers, are you?"

"Cert I am!" replied Solly, rapidly jotting down: "Hero maintained modest attitude to the end."

"But I didn't do anything!" Tommy persisted.

"Course you didn't!" said Solly; and snapping his wad of paper into his pocket he sped away to the office that he might write the story before it grew cold.

Peeling off his coat and turning up the oil lamp he brushed a space among the loose exchanges on his desk, weighted down their fluttering leaves with his trusty forty-five-caliber rebuttal of libel charges, and let his pencil fly. Solly had been trained as a cub on the old New York Herald of James Gordon Bennett, father of interviewing, and prided himself on keeping to the sound traditions of that school. From an introduction which ran the whole spectrum of highly colored adjectives he passed gracefully into the question-and-answer method; whereof here is a sample:

"Q. How did you make an entrance to the holocaust?

"A. I did nothing.

"Q. Your modesty is to your credit. The members of John W. Sabin Hose No. 1, who beheld the daring rescue, know better.

"A. Well, then, I thrust my foot against the back door, which I had found locked. It yielded to my emphatic pressure —"

Having finished and put the conventional "30" at the bottom of the page, Solly wiped the perspiration of inspiration from his brow and set himself to compose headlines. In his literary style Solly was a disciple of the old New York Herald; but he modeled his heads on the famous one-line alliterative thrillers of the contemporary Cincinnati Enquirer. And he brought forth as follows:

BURST
THROUGH BURNING BUILDING

MAIN STREET MOB WITNESSES
DARING DEED

FIRST FIRE RESCUE IN
CARBONADO CAMP

COLUMBINE TIME

MODEST MINER SAVES PROMINENT
CITIZEN FROM CERTAIN AND HORRIBLE DEATH
AND ATTEMPTS TO DENY VALIANT ACT

Conflagration Consumes
Four Main-Street Residences

Sipple's Store
Saved by Brave Effort
of Fire Department and its
Heroic Chief

Nervously exhausted by now, Solley filed this, his masterpiece, where the foreman would get it for his first take in the morning, and strolled over to renew his forces at the Arizona House.

CHAPTER VIII

THAT day of the Firemen's Ball, Tommy was to see his lady of the columbines and of miracles only at breakfast. She entered the dining room, lagging a little behind her mother, and threw him one glance full of softness and meaning, the while Mrs. Bates bowed distantly. During breakfast she twice looked in his direction when her mother's attention was distracted. The second time her lips pursed up lightly for an instant.

To anyone but Tommy, watching it would have seemed merely an accidental expression. But he knew it for what it was — the ghost of that kiss, the first she had ever given in love to man, and which had been all a sleepless night dying on his own lips a rapturous, lingering death. She passed again; and some instinct told him he was not to see her at dinner. In fact that was the day chosen by John W. Sabin for the delayed visit of his guests to Sacramento Hill and the mines.

Having nothing else to do Tommy strolled over to the Arizona House; and there the situation which life had thrust upon him struck him squarely in the face. From the gambling hall next door, by night ringing with the clatter of chips, the whir of the roulette wheel, the monotone of the dealer and the babble of a hundred excited voices, came now only a clatter and swishing made by the porter in the act of scrubbing out. The barroom was deserted except for Mike the bartender and two prospectors, lately returned from a small strike and taking their vacation among the delights of Main Street.

"Well, young fellow!" said Mike, who had hitherto paid Tommy only perfunctory attention, "you look fine for a man who went through what you did last night. I hear Old Calamity is all right again this morning. I guess he was smoked an' biled both!"

One of the two prospectors took a comparatively straight course from the bar to Tommy.

"Lemme shake your hand," he said a little thickly. "I seen it. H'roic act. Jest went straight to it an' done it like that!" He swung

his hardened palm at Tommy's hand, missed it, and swung again.

In fact Solly Watrous had spent most of the night in the Arizona House. His glow of artistic creation had not yet burned out; his story still absorbed all his thoughts. The more he drank, the more loudly he proclaimed to all who would listen the remarkable nature of the event which the camp had just witnessed.

"A regular heroic fire rescue!" he said. "Thing you don't see one time in a million fires!"

Mike the bartender and one or two regular habitués of the Arizona House recognized the hero from description as a young man who had been mooning round the barroom for the past few days. Truth to tell, no one had thought of the event at the time as anything very unusual in a region where man daily staked his like against other men or against the cruel forces of Nature. It took the golden tongue of Solly Watrous, well oiled with red-eye whisky, to make them see that it was remarkable.

Before the prospector had finished wringing Tommy's hand, Sandy McNutt, captain of John

W. Sabin Hose No. 1, thrust his neat and elegant figure into the barroom for the purpose of getting his morning fortification after a night spent in too much public service and dalliance, against a lively day in the real estate and insurance business.

"That's him," said Mike the bartender, indicating Tommy with a jerk of his head as he poured the libation — "the young fellow that done it."

Sandy left his drink untasted, crossed to Tommy and slapped him on the back before offering his hand. "I'm the captain of Hose No. 1," said Sandy, " — and I want to tell you that you made suckers of us all last night. Say, you're a born fireman, you are! Saved my reputation, you did. If anybody'd got burned up in that fire and no attempt at rescue, the buck would have been passed to me for a cinch!"

"I didn't do anything," faltered Tommy.

"It's your play to say that," replied Sandy. "Say, can you run? Don't matter whether you can or not, you've got to join us, honorary membership if nothing else. Why didn't you stick

round last night? Everybody was looking for you. Anyhow you're coming to the Firemen's Ball in Masonic Hall to-night. Sure you are. Have a drink!''

Tommy, accepting chose beer; and as he drank, a little perplexity which had been clouding his mind all day suddenly blew away. He had been wondering vaguely how he was to fulfill the first command laid upon him by the mistress of his soul and get to the Firemen's Ball. It was, he knew, a very select and private occasion. The women in camp stood on two separate sides of a distinct line. All those on the brighter side would be invited to the Firemen's Ball. For the men, invitation was limited to the members of the hose and hook and ladder companies, what Solly Watrous called the prominent business men, and great persons like John W. Sabin. Here life had dropped the grail of his quest into his lap .

By now his shame at accepting a crown he had not earned was growing a little dimmer. It troubled him less and less as the day wore on and public adulation continued to shower him with its favors. When the Evening

Clarion came out on the streets and — retired in a far corner of the Arizona House bar — he read Solly's masterpiece, suggestion had worked its miracle. He really believed it himself. After all, he had found Old Calamity. After all, he had shipped some smoke when he rounded the corner of the house. If he had been a coward he would have dropped Old Calamity right there and saved himself; but he didn't; he kept on. If that house hadn't been a furnace which no man could possibly enter he would certainly have gone into it. This reporter hadn't exaggerated much; only enough to make the thing readable. When a little later Tommy met Solly Watrous, ranging in search of notes from the mines, and Solly asked "What did you think of my story?" Tommy only answered weakly, almost perfunctorily, "Well, I guess you touched it up a bit."

Before night Old Calamity had put the capstone on Tommy's fame. The victim of alcohol and smoke, tucked into a bunk in Doc Jones' temporary hospital back of the city marshal's office, had recovered consciousness. Before

Solly Watrous heard of this and raced to interview him Old Calamity had read the article in the Evening Clarion. Now all that Old Calamity remembered of the night's events, after a sudden fading of this exterior world in the bar of the Arizona House, was a dim recollection of rough handling. Solly Watrous story, wherein he figured as a prominent mining man, did more to revive him than the ministrations of medical science; for Old Calamity had cherished always a yearning for fame. By the time Solly Watrous arrived it needed only a little suggestion to bring out of him a marvelous story wherein hope and struggle yielded to despair, to resignation, to blackness, to awakening, to joy, to gratitude.

Said Solly's story as he ripped it off for the second and last edition:

"Q. You really believe, then, that but for the heroic efforts of young Coulter you would have perished in the holocaust?

"A. Unquestionably. I owe my preservation to that brave young man. I shall seek the first occasion to wring his hand and express my sentiments of thanksgiving."

As false as history, the story of the great

fire rescue had now become as permanent.

All day long Tommy swam in a pleasant notoriety which made brighter that glow of love triumphant burning within him. In that mood he saw only fulfillment. Hitherto Mrs. Bates, the dragon at the door of his lady, John W. Sabin, the ogre waiting without, had troubled his imagination. Now these were things which had no existence. Obstacles? They were nothing. He could dare anything.

She was not at the Marlborough for supper; John W. Sabin was banqueting the Bates ladies at the mine. But he checked his moment of disappointment by reflecting that he knew he should see her at the Firemen's Ball. Besides, he was now an object of attention; perfect strangers insisted on sitting with him and drawing him out on the subject of the rescue. Standing after supper in the Marlborough lobby he caught just one glimpse of her as she flitted up the stairs; but she managed to turn just before the shadow blotted her out, and to throw a glance at him. Waiting no longer, he dressed with unusual care, spending a quarter of an hour in choosing between his three neckties.

CHAPTER IX

THE Little Casino got along with a single piano player the night of the Firemen's Ball; and sharp at nine o'clock the strains of its band were heard far up the hill, striking hard with all power of brass and drum on the stirring notes of Hail to the Chief. A minute after, all Main Street was hushed with anticipation; five minutes later, to inspiring and inspired cheers, the procession swung past. First came sundry honorary members, arrayed in civilian clothes but carrying kerosene torches; in their midst Pat Burke, city recorder, and Doc Jones, the coroner, bore the American flag and the red gonfalon of the fire department. There followed John W. Sabin Hose No. 1, in full uniform of red shirts, black trousers and gaudy helmets, Sandy McNutt not pulling on the leading lines, as he did during the moments of splendid action, but marching before with his trumpet held smartly under his arm. The hose company did not propose to be caught napping

in that community of high winds and wooden buildings; so the cart carried, as usual, a full barrel, which had already, in taking an especially severe bump, slopped over and wet down the red shirt of the nozzle-man. Behind the hook and ladder company marched, mimicked and frolicked that following of small citizens on foot without which no procession is complete in any land—a very small fringe in this case, since families in Carbonado Camp were still few.

John W. Sabin did not march with his merry men, nor did he wear, on this especial occasion, his uniform. He waited their coming by the platform of Masonic Hall; and he was clad in one of the only three dress suits in camp. Down his frilled shirt ran a row of magnificent diamonds, giving back gleam for gleam to the diamonds on his fingers. The ridges of his leathery skin gleamed fresh from the razor; his sea-lion mustache shone with pomade; the long straight, grizzled locks of his front hair had been combed over and plastered down with bear's grease to conceal his bald spot.

About this central and ornamental figure

Masonic Hall flaunted all the decoration within the power of Carbonado camp. All day Sam Haney's express wagon had been hauling dwarf pine trees and pine branches, cut in the sparse, struggling woods by Bear Creek. The trees were all posed about the walls; the branches made above the platform an arch whose keystone was a sheaf of American flags. From tree to tree about the wall ran the red and yellow of the fire department in loops of cheesecloth. Branches made a bower for the musicians and half concealed a table in the corner, where Mike the bartender presided in white jacket and apron over a punch which—he himself said—was warranted to make your hair curl.

About John W. Sabin were grouped those prominent citizens who had chosen not to march with the torchlights, and the ladies. The men wore their Sunday best, festally touched up with such additions as white waistcoats and diamond studs. As before mentioned, there were two other dress suits in camp besides John W. Sabin's. One belonged to Willie Tutweiler, the assayer, who had lately arrived from college and the East. He had entered, indeed, wearing

the final touch of decoration in the form of a pair of white gloves, which, after one furtive look round the hall, he surreptitiously peeled off. The other—a venerable antique—belonged to Bill Hayden, superintendent of the North Star, who, as every one knew, enjoyed a college education before he took to mining.

Already there were more men in the hall than women; Tommy, entering a little before the grand entry of the Firemen, felt his heart sink as he reflected on the struggle that must ensue for the favor of the ladies when the procession should arrive. At that, the ball had drawn every fireman on the respectable side of the perfectly definite line. In social position and in costume they ranged all the way from Mrs. Black, whose husband was beginning to vie with John W. Sabin in prospects and importance, to the biscuit shooters at the Marlborough. Mrs. Black was little of frame; she was dumpy with the twenty years of hard work that had gone before the turn of the family fortune; she was sallow with the old suns of long trails. She blazed in a wine-colored silk dress whose high tints only emphasized the

yellowish tones of her skin, whose bodice confined her so tightly that she seemed momentarily about to pop out of it. Two great diamond earrings frolicked with the light as she bobbed her head in conversation. Hattie Murchison, waitress at the Marlborough, and on the other end of the social scale, wore simply the gown of plain brown nun's veiling, draped modestly yet modishly over a bustle, in which she attended church on Sundays. Mrs. Hayden, wife of the college-bred Bill, herself young and blondly, innocuously pretty, wore black lace over geranium red.

"The most stylish costume here," confided Essie Singleton, the camp dressmaker, to her confidante, Mrs. Jarmouth, the jeweler's wife. "That lace guimpe I call tasty. What say I copy it for that afternoon toilette of yours? As for them — *de trop*, my dear, *de trop*" — Miss Singleton culled French from the fashion papers and loved to air it—"do you suppose there's anything between the girl and John W.? To me it's as plain as day — both of 'em are setting their caps. I never could abide that

brunet type! I've found them deceitful, if anyone should ask me."

Other feminine eyes besides Miss Singleton's were searching out the flaws in the two stranger ladies, grouped near the platform beside John W. Sabin; other tongues were whispering criticism. If Mrs. Bates was aware of this she showed it only by a slightly more majestic demeanor. As for Nellie, she wore her air of sweet unconsciousness, lowering her eyes modestly each time John W. introduced her to a prominent citizen of the camp, raising them prettily to respond with conventional nothings, which became somethings with the music of her voice and the play of her expression.

Tommy, standing back by the door, watched the group at the platform with all his eyes. To his first hot jealousy succeeded a sense of perplexity. She had promised him dances! To claim them he must beard the dragon. He even became guiltily conscious, for the first time in two days, that he was loafing on the grubstake of John W. Sabin. But the sense of recognized heroism was still upon him; still was he in the mood to attempt anything. And as luck would

have it, just as he sidled unobtrusively across the hall the band of the Little Casino, having fortified itself for its evening labors at the Pioneer Saloon next door, was seated and ready. The snare drum emitted a thundering long roll, bringing the whole company to attention; and the brasses hit together the first note of Lo, the Conquering Hero Comes!

That was the signal to Sandy McNutt, waiting on the staircase. "Forward, march!" he commanded, so loudly and masterfully that it was heard above the best efforts of the Little Casino. And into the hall, among roars from within and without, swung the firemen, two by two.

Tommy chose this moment of distraction in the crowd to hurry up to the focus of his attention. John W. Sabin was looking upon the spectacle, was dissertating to Mrs. Bates upon the fire department they were going to have when the railroad came through. "Got the horses all picked out and trained in Denver!" he said, and he glowed with a technical description of the points of the big nigh bay, so that

Mrs. Bates, for very politeness, had to keep her gaze on him.

Nellie greeted her lover with a soft flush of her eyes. As he came near her she was holding out her dance program, a magnificent specimen of the work of the Clarion Press—all spangles and stars and rustic lettering.

"Quick — here, and here, and here, and here!" she whispered.

He rapidly wrote "Thomas J. Coulter" in the four spaces she had indicated with the little flower stalk of her finger. He looked down on her when he had finished. He stood close; his broad back was between her and the prying world, so that she was safe in giving her expression play for a moment, in letting her lips ripple like a river of roses with voiceless love words. And at that instant — John W. Sabin, having paused for very want of adjectives to express the future glory of Carbonado and its fire department — Mrs. Bates took occasion to turn toward her daughter.

She could not see Nellie's face, though she did read something in the droop of her neck; but she caught the expression of the young man

— his widened eyes, his relaxed lips, a play of color in his cheeks.

"Come, Nellie," she began, "we've —"

But Nellie, perfect mistress of herself and of the situation, interrupted with: "Mother, you know Mr. Coulter, I believe. You remember, we met him coming in on the stage."

"Oh, yes indeed!" said Mrs. Bates, stiffening her best society tone with a slight frigidity.

"And Mr. Sabin — may I present Mr. Coulter? He's the man who made that rescue at the fire last night."

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed John W. Sabin, wrapping his great, hardened palm round the hand of Tommy. "Been waiting to run across you all day. Say, it was great! Have the boys asked you into the fire department yet? Say, what's your job? I —"

This embarrassing line of inquiry was cut short by the stentorian voice of Doc Jones, the coroner, in his capacity of floor manager, bawling: "All out for the grand march!"

By a consent so common that no one even expressed it, John W. Sabin was to lead the

Grand March, as he had led everything in Carbonado Camp.

"Come on, Nellie!" he exclaimed, starting forward with feet which danced awkwardly to the music, and an attempt at sprightly motion which set him rolling like a bear. "We're going to show them!"

But Nellie had drawn back.

"Oh, but you're leading the grand march with mother!" she said.

"Thought it was you I asked," faltered John W. Sabin, the quiver at the end of his sea-lion mustache expressing that he was somewhat taken aback.

Mrs. Bates looked upon her daughter and their eyes met — dark, glittering, pointed with light like hostile, opposing lances. It lasted for only a few seconds, that glance, but it was long enough for a whole hidden drama of character. Mrs. Bates had shirked the moment, which she always knew was coming some day, when her forthputting, creating will would meet in decisive combat that will which she felt in her daughter — less active but as immobile as granite. The battle had suddenly been joined.

The less aggressive of the two had forced it at a time when it could not be fought with articulate speech — and speech was the best weapon Mrs. Bates had in her armory.

It was the mother who first broke the hold of her eyes and looked away. And in that little effort of the tiny muscles which control the human eyeball she momentarily surrendered to her daughter as completely as though in sight of all Carbonado Camp she had knelt on the ballroom floor.

"Thank you, Mr. Sabin," she said in her most cordial society manner, "my daughter is quite right. A young lady shouldn't make herself too conspicious."

She thrust her hand under the black broadcloth of John W. Sabin's arm. As she tripped away she did not look back, but something about the quiver among the jet spangles at the rear of her corsage expressed a highly disturbed mood.

Sandy McNutt and Pat Burke, men of action both, were upon Nellie as soon as her mother turned away. Simultaneously they asked for the honor.

But Tommy spoke up with an assuming boldness which would have been impossible to him a short twenty-four hours ago: "Miss Bates promised me the grand march," he said.

Miss Bates did not speak; but she did not hesitate either. With an assenting smile, followed by a sweet backward glance of conciliation on the two unfortunate suitors, she slipped her hand under Tommy's arm; through kid and cloth, through blood and muscle, it radiated a delicate warmth to the very marrow of his bones. They floated on rosy clouds lighted by a star mist to a place in the line at the rear of the other mixed couples, just ahead of those firemen and prominent citizens who, having lost in the scramble for ladies, were paired off man with man. Now looking straight ahead, a pleasant but disguising mask of society expression over her features, her voice so controlled that it could not reach the couple ahead, she was speaking: "Oh, columbine boy, you don't think because I let you kiss me—that I let anyone. It was the first time."

"No — No!" he hastened to reply, and could

say no more then because he could not trust his voice.

"And if you do not kiss me again I shall never kiss anyone else — never and mean it," she said. "But oh, my beloved, my columbine boy, my dearest —"

"Ladies and gents split out!" came the command of Doc Jones, dancing backward and forward with the music, his arms beating rhythmically.

So the warmth on Tommy's arm must give place to a winter of longing until he had circled the hall in the file of men dancers. Before and behind him certain gamesome persons had begun to do the lock step; Tommy joined in the frolic mechanically.

Now the locked line had rounded the hall and she was dancing toward him, her two little hands extended like two white lilies of five petals.

As they locked arms and resumed the march she leaned her slight weight deliciously upon him; and it was she who began to speak:

"I don't know why I have done it."

"Done what?" he managed to ask her.

"Everything — all this — last night — you know. Think, I saw you first only three days ago. And I know nothing about you except what you have told me."

"We don't need to know," he said with his own direct simplicity. "All I know is that I love you."

"And I loved you from the time I saw you among the columbines. Isn't it wonderful that I knew it — that we both knew it? And now what are we going to do?"

"I don't know — something, I guess," he answered vaguely, desperately.

"Ah, but we have four more dances to talk of that," she said. "I want only to be near you now—to touch you—to know that I love you—love you, my dearest, dearest columbine boy!"

They were silent for a moment, swimming in clouds of ecstasy; then the voice of Doc Jones bawled: "Forward in fours!"

Charlie Pringle, head clerk at the Marlborough, paired off with Hattie Murchison, the biscuit shooter, swung in now at their right. There was no more chance for this intimate conversation even at the low, controlled tone

which Nellie had employed. There was still less chance when it became "Forward by eights!" and two pairs of mated firemen, occasionaly scuffing and punching each other in the ribs, marched at Tommy's left. There were simply little almost hysterical touches and pressures of her hand on his arm, little squeezes of his arm on her hand. Even when Doc Jones announced "Waltz your partners to their places!" they did not speak, but simply yielded themselves to the deliciousness of love, music and motion.

When they returned from the floor Mrs. Bates, as lady of the leading couple, had resumed her place by the platform. Something warned Tommy not to linger; he managed as graceful a bow as he could muster and withdrew. And now it rained men, making toward Nellie to beg the favor of dances; a conventionality risen from the scarcity of women decreed that programs should not be filled in advance.

Mrs. Bates spoke low and sharply: "Don't take the first dance. I want to talk with you."

"Got any dances left?" inquired Sandy

McNutt, whose speed had brought him to Nellie's side one stride in advance of the rest.

"Yes, indeed. I can give you the first!" said Nellie sweetly and without looking at her mother.

The quick stab of a white tooth over Mrs. Bates' under lip was smothered almost instantly by her serene expression of society calm. But anyone who knew that lady might have traced an undercurrent of determination. She had lost the first skirmish and the second; she proposed now to join decisive action with all her forces.

And luck played with her. The cornet of the Little Casino band, managed by Pop Bacon, who had been a bugler in the Civil War, tooted the assembly; whereupon Doc Jones strode forward, his frock coat swishing about his fat legs.

"Ladies and gentleman," he said, "I want to introduce to your kind attention, Sam Smith, champion buck-and-wing dancer of the Elite Variety Theayter."

During the loud applause which followed, Mrs. Bates looked about her. John W. Sabin

had gone to the other side of the ballroom. Sandy McNutt was watching the agile entry of Sam Smith. Now, if ever, was the moment.

"Nellie," said Mrs. Bates slowly and icily, "I want you should come to the ladies' room with me."

Mrs. Bates had prepared herself for a refusal and had planned further measures.

To her surprise Nellie responded airily, "Very well, mother!"

Alone Mrs. Bates turned upon her offspring. In her baffled rage she began with a strategic mistake; she attacked with all her forces at once.

"Eleanor Virginia Bates," she said, "I want you should tell me right now what's between you and that young man!"

Nellie picked up a powder puff from the pine bureau and began daintily to powder her nose, the reflection powdering back from the nine-inch mirror. And airily she replied, "I wonder if that isn't a matter between me and the young man."

"'Between you and the young man'!" quoted Mrs. Bates with all the sarcasm she

could put into her voice. "When did you fix it up that he should take those four waltzes? Tell me now — I've seen your program."

"Last night at the fire," responded Nellie casually, patting into place a curl that had strayed from her bang.

"How long has this thing been going on?" demanded Mrs. Bates. She was fast losing control of herself; the icy tone of a society woman, which she had assumed at the beginning of this vital interview, was shaken with little tremors. "Ever since we struck Carbonado, I suppose."

"About that time," replied Nellie, her own airy tone not shaken in the least.

Now she had twisted her lace handkerchief over a gloved little finger, was removing an excess of powder from the delicate crease beside her nose. Her hand was absolutely steady.

"And Mr. Sabin is noticing," said Mrs. Bates. Her voice now began audibly to quiver. "If he wants to he can skin that little upstart whippersnapper alive. Thinks because he got his name in the papers — and him not even scorched. A common, coarse —" Her words ran into an

"a-a-a" of disgust and she bit her lip as though to enforce self control.

Now Nellie's voice was quivering ever so slightly.

"And we are especially select and refined, aren't we?"

Self-control deserted Mrs. Bates with a rush.

"Eleanor Bates!" she exploded. "I could just spank you! I wish you were little enough so I could switch you. That's the manners they taught you in the seminary, is it. That's—"

And suddenly anger ran into action. Nellie was facing her now. Mrs. Bates, with a sudden spring amazingly quick for a woman so large, so mature and so tightly laced, laid both hands on her daughter's shoulders and shook her energetically. Nellie did not struggle against this violence. She yielded to it, quite loose of body and inert. Something like terror not unmixed with shame came across the flushed countenance of Mrs. Bates. Her last violent shake died down into nothing; she dropped her hands from Nellie's shoulders; she noted now that her daughter's eyes looked at her steadily,

that her daughter's face was as expressionless as the moon.

"I'm sor —"

Midway on the syllable the other emotion again rose within Mrs. Bates, again overflowed.

"Me, grubbing and slaving all my life to put you where you belong—and now—just when—"

She checked herself; but she had already said too much. Nellie, adjusting a hook of her bodice which had shaken loose during these proceedings, spoke in a perfectly controlled voice.

"I thank you and Mr. Sabin for announcing your plans, though it's true you've already made them plain enough."

"Well, if I have," said Mrs. Bates, just the suggestion of a wail weakening her tone, "ain't he a fine man? He's got the sweetest nature I ever knew." Her tone hardened again. "That upstart you're having your low flirtation with ain't good enough to black his boots." Mrs. Bates, baffled, irritated to madness by this deep, steely calm, was swinging back into the violent mood. "If you don't cancel those four dances

I'll see that Mr. Sabin does something. I'll see —''

''I'll cancel those dances,'' responded Nellie sweetly, ''but if I do I'll cancel all Mr. Sabin's dances. I can make a scene too.''

Here the ladies' battle stopped as suddenly as when little boys, fighting it out in a back lot, are interrupted by the policeman. For the lively ''tum-tum'' of the band and the quick rhythmic shuffle of feet which they had been taking in subconsciously all the time, came to an end, were succeeded by a roar of applause. As it died away it let in the sound of the Little Casino Band breaking into the strains of a schottish.

''I have this first dance,'' said Nellie.

Mrs. Bates had it too — with John W. Sabin, at the great magnate's special request. By common unexpressed consent, therefore, they both turned away. But as they crossed the threshold into the glare and blare of Masonic Hall, Mrs. Bates delivered her last shot. Of all the mistakes to which rage and irritation had led her during that losing battle of hers, this was perhaps the greatest.

"I'll have to take measures," she said in a determined and superior tone.

"I can take measures myself," said Nellie, still sweetly.

They must drop this subject; for now they were floating cloudily, in the midst of the gathered silks about their lips, across the ballroom floor. They both looked especially lovely, what with that underlying flush so vastly becoming to a brunet skin. And toward them were skipping to the music their partners for this dance —John W. Sabin and Sandy McNutt.

We will dance for a moment — somewhat jerkily, owing to the stiffened joints of the masculine partner — with John W. Sabin and Mrs. Bates. The schottish is a lively measure for persons in their forties. Mrs. Bates made a delicious sighing as she swept round the hall, and John W. frankly emitted puffs and grunts. But still Mrs. Bates was a born dancer and as she danced she planned.

"Do you know anything about that young man who carried Old Calamity out of the fire last night?" she began from his shoulder .

"Nope," said John W. "Never set eyes on

him before. Seems a well-set-up kid. I notice the boys got him into the fire department right away."

"He appears to be paying a great deal of attention to my Nellie," said Mrs. Bates. "You know how a mother is."

"Yep, you're sure a good mother," said John W. Sabin.

"I can't say I exactly like his looks," pursued Mrs. Bates, "and there's always a chance in a mining camp that a man you don't know may be a rough character."

Mrs. Bates spoke between puffs of breath; emphatically the schottish is not a dance for middle-aged persons suddenly transplanted to a two-mile altitude.

"Well, if he does anything rough he'll be chucked out on his ear," said John W. Sabin. "Otherwise girls will be girls, same as boys will be boys. She might as well have her fling while she's young." He paused to grunt for one or two breaths. "Say," he remarked, turning his trail-sharpened hawk's eyes down on the top of his partner's head and rapidly changing the subject, "you've got great hair! You don't

need any transformers or false fronts, do you?"

"No," said Mrs. Bates, "hair runs in our family."

Mrs. Bates spoke absently. She had been trying to work on his jealousy, to goad him into eliminating this young, disturbing upstart from the scene. Her plan of action did not seem to be working well at all. Swiftly she meditated other plans, like declaring that Tommy had insulted her daughter, getting him put out, by the power of John W. Sabin, from the Firemen's Ball and from Carbonado Camp. But when she considered Nellie, remembered that firm "I can take measures, too," she ceased to entertain that course. By the time the schottish had bobbed itself to a finish Mrs. Bates realized that things must stand as they were for that evening. When she got Nellie alone she would take her own threatened measures.

With one last boom of the bass drum the dance was over. John W. Sabin, on the way back from the floor, regained his breath and his power of conversation.

"I always like a lot of hair; your daughter's well provided too," he remarked.

Now it is the third dance on the program and the second waltz. Tommy — with Mrs. Bates affecting not to see him at all — has floated away with Nellie, enjoying, for the last time this evening, the sensations of a rapid tour through heaven to the music of golden harps. For as they reached the center of the floor, as Mrs. Bates, waltzing with Doc Jones, swung off toward a corner of the hall, Nellie took one long sad look up into Tommy's eyes and said low and seriously: "Do you know that I may not see you again after to-night?"

"Why?" he asked, so loud as to bring a little "Sh-h!" to her lips; and, dancers though they both were, they lost step.

"Now listen carefully, dearest," she said. "I am watched all the time. I must speak low. I am to marry John W. Sabin — and his money!"

"You aren't engaged, are you?" He spoke low, but his burst of voice was sharp with agony.

"I swear to you I am not!" she said.

An observer would have been struck by the contrast between the expression of her face, smiling mild conventional pleasure over Tommy's shoulder, and the tragedy of her

words — culled, if the young lady must be betrayed, from much surreptitious seminary reading of Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth and Ouida.

"I have never come nearer him than to shake his hand," she went on, still with the same expression and tone, "but it's all arranged between them. And just now — my — she — objected to you. She made a scene. I told her I would dance with you to-night, but I know that they will not let me see you again."

"But I must see you again!" he said. "Always — every day — always!" he burst out, weakly repeating himself because he could not find language that would express all that he felt.

"Always and forever," she breathed from the nest her cheek was making against his shoulder.

"I'm going to marry you! I don't care what they do!" said he.

It was the first time that word "marry" had been mentioned between them; he realized this as he spoke, realized too that it had always been understood, and vaguely wondered.

"If we do it — it will have to be quickly," she said.

That same observer would have noticed here that her expression of mild conventional pleasure changed ever so slightly; that it took on a shade of expectancy, of suspense.

If he did not answer it was because a rush of emotions and ideas choked him. From it all, as a great flame bursts from a smoldering fire, came a dazzling plan of action. It was an idea so bold that it would have been impossible to the Tommy Coulter of a week ago, doing his day's work and drawing his day's rations at the Big Hope grubstake above Lone Grave Canon. It might not have been possible a short twenty-four hours ago. But now, not only had love touched him but also praise of valor. Helped by the artistry of Solly Watrous and the soft appreciation of his beloved, he had persuaded himself that he was a daredevil. The very fact that he must do what he now meant to do for the praise or blame of all the world seemed only to stimulate him. So he was silent, his feet dancing mechanically to the music; and she for her own part did not further pursue this line of

conversation, but only murmured now and then a soft love-word as one who talks in rapturous sleep. The last long-drawn note of the music blended with applause; the shouting and clatter seemed to awaken them both.

"Leave me before we reach mother," she said. "Oh, my dearest, it will be so long to that next dance!"

It was indeed long for Tommy. He had failed — fortunately, he now felt — to get any dances except those four he had taken with Nellie. Idly, mechanically, he drifted to that corner behind the evergreen screen where Mike the bartender presided over the punch bowl. Mike had exceeded his instructions and smuggled in certain wet goods even more potent. The corner was growing popular with firemen who had lost out in the scramble for dances with the ladies. It had long ago become far too noisy, so that its babble could be heard even above the strenuous pounding and tooting of the band. Tommy was caught instantly in the whirl of his own popularity, hauled to the improvised bar, besought, commanded to have a drink of "man-size stuff." Keeping his

head he took only a glass of punch. Sandy McNutt asked him to tell the story of the rescue; when Tommy blushed, dodged and tried to edge away he enhanced his reputation for modesty; whereas he was merely troubled with embarrassment and desire to be alone. The opportunity presented itself a few moments later, when a half drunken argument started as to the condition of Old Calamity — one factor maintaining that the old horse thief was as good as ever, the other asserting that the old road agent was still in danger. Everyone joined in.

"Leave it to Doc Jones!" said someone, and, in the midst of loud calls for Doc Jones, Tommy slipped away. By now his daring had evaporated a little; he was in that second stage of determination when practical obstacles will insist on pushing into the picture. As he crossed the hall he caught a glimpse of Nellie, dancing with John W. Sabin — her torso drawn back, his figure rolling bearlike in the measure of a polka. And determination blazed again. He wandered bareheaded out to the lights and clamor of Main Street; wandered in again before the polka was ended; remained outside for

what seemed an eternity, entered this time by the back way, to find a lancers started, and Nellie dancing with Sandy McNutt. Again his determination blazed. It was alternately dimming and brightening all the eternal twenty minutes during which he waited for that second waltz; but at each increasing rhythm of its fluctuations it burned brighter.

In one of the blazing moods he collected himself long enough to note and remember the approaches to Masonic Hall. The front door opened on to Main Street — to the rush of its crowds, the sound of its dance-hall orchestras, its clicking stud-poker chips, its whirring roulette wheels, its lively, optimistic clamor. The back entrance opened from an anteroom used customarily in the mystic ceremonies of the lodge, but to-night serving as coat room for both ladies and gentlemen. Behind it lay a dark alley leading to Galena Avenue — for all its pretentious name a wayfare of small cabins and shanties, long ago dark in sleep. Tommy took a little excursion down Galena Avenue and returned hurriedly to Masonic Hall.

The second waltz. No sooner had they begun

dancing than decency prompted him to a line of inquiry that he had dodged hitherto.

"If you should marry me," he said, "you would have nothing. I'm going to be rich some day. I'm poor now. I've got just a hundred and forty dollars in the world."

"My father had fifty dollars when he married my mother," she said. "She's always talking about how she slaved for him in those early years — and now — You don't suppose I'd want money, do you? I'd work my fingers to the bone!"

"Then listen!" he said. "You're going to marry me to-night — if we can get away. I know how."

He stopped now, waiting for her word of refusal or of assent. She did not speak for a moment. Her cheek was leaning against his shoulder, and he could see no more than her glittering crown of black hair, which radiated a delicate perfume.

"Oh, I am afraid!" she whispered, and then: "Yes, my dearest, and as soon as we can!"

He had intended to wait an opportunity later in the evening — had even planned, though

imperfectly, how to create a diversion. But at this instant they were dancing toward that cloakroom door. It drew him, as by a power superior to his will. He waltzed her to the threshold, stopped, opened the door. She gave one backward glance. Her mother, in the embrace of Pat Burke — a close dancer — was swinging round a far corner of the hall. Nellie did not look back again.

The door closed behind her. They were alone in the cloakroom, where overcoats, mantles, shawls and sealskin cloaks covered every inch of the wall, made grotesque heaps on every chair.

"Do you know where your wrap is?" he asked.

"There."

If he hesitated for a moment now it was not because he was undecided but because he had something more to say to her and was not sure how she would take it.

"Do you want to leave word for your mother? I guess you'd better —" he began.

"I intended to do that," she said.

She began scribbling on the back of her dance

program. When she had finished she stuffed it into the pocket of her mother's sealskin coat. She looked up now. Tommy was holding her mantle for her. Into it she slipped; she seized her hat, too, but made no movement to put it on, for he had opened the outer door. Through it they passed together. A moment later, hand in hand, they were stumbling along the rough dark roadway of Galena Avenue.

CHAPTER X

JOHN W. SABIN, in his capacity of first prominent citizen and general manager for everything in Carbonado Camp, had edited the program of dances at the Firemen's Ball and had decreed that there should be no encores. "We'll still be going it by the time the day shift comes on if we let 'em repeat," he had said. But after the second waltz — a Strauss selection and a specialty of the Little Casino — the demand became so loud and insistent as to override all rules; and the band swung into a dreamy encore.

During this dance Mrs. Bates, whenever Pat Burke's close hold allowed, was darting quick, nervous glances about the ballroom. When Pat Burke bowed her to her own corner she looked still more nervously across the shifting kaleidoscope made by black coats, red shirts and light feminine pinks, blues and lavenders. Gradually the kaleidoscope came to rest and its colors massed — the light tints along the wall, the red

and black in the corner beside Mike the bartender's punch.

But neither Nellie nor Tommy emerged. Mrs. Bates drew a mask of stately indifference over her features, to hide the anxiety, tempered by pure rage, which surged within. From the group about the punch approached John W. Sabin, his hawk's face illumined by good humor. The nervous strain of that evening had sharpened all perceptions and memories in Mrs. Bates. She glanced at her program. The next dance was the Virginia Reel; Nellie had it, she remembered, with John W. Sabin. She hesitated a moment. Mr. Sabin stopped to pass a remark to Mrs. Black. That gave her a little time; and she decided not to wait and make excuses, but to go forthwith on the hunt.

Ever since that quarrel in the ladies' room, she realized now, she had been afraid of her daughter's mood — of the unsounded depths in that nature which she had known so little during the past ten years, and of what those depths might bring forth. An intuition of her disaster stabbed her for an instant.

But the thought was simply too dreadful to

be entertained. She put it back. With dignity, and with as much speed as she dared to show the critical world of Carbonado Camp, she floated in the midst of her draperies to the ladies' room. Nellie was not there.

She tried the front entrance in the angry expectation that she might interrupt her daughter and that young man in a tête-à-tête. A group of firemen were rolling cigarettes and debating loudly. They hushed their clamor as she came among them, and stared at her silently and respectfully as she opened the door and took a frigid look over the crowd of loafers and the activities of Main Street beyond. Now, as she turned back toward the cloakroom and traversed the hall, she was walking so fast, spite of herself, that the waiting dancers along the wall followed her with their looks.

Fritz, the cloakroom attendant — in private life porter at the Arizona House — had been temporarily absent when Tommy and Nellie made their hurried entrance and exit ten minutes before. Business being slack for him at that hour of the night he had taken occasion to slip over to the Pioneer Saloon for a drink.

Now he was sitting back on a pile of coats, enjoying a smoke. At Mrs. Bates' sudden entrance he sprang up, making awkward efforts to conceal his pipe.

Mrs. Bates took one long breath and gathered her forces before she asked in a sweetly superior tone: "Have you seen anything of a young lady in a pink dress — a dark young lady?"

"Your daughter, ma'am?" inquired Fritz.

"Yes, my daughter," replied Mrs. Bates rather haughtily.

"No, ma'am — haven't seen her," replied Fritz.

"Not this whole evening?" inquired Mrs. Bates a little more sharply.

"No, ma'am," said Fritz. Then he paused. "Did see a couple goin' it up Galena Avenue when I come in ten minutes or so back. The girl might 'a' been her."

Had Fritz been dowered with keen and subtle perceptions he would have read a whole drama in the stiffening of Mrs. Bates' frame. As it was, Fritz spoke again with the same polite if stolid indifference:

"Guess I can tell whether it was her by seein'

if her wrap's gone." He pawed over a pile on a chair. "Yep. Her cloak was right there, with yours. Yep. It's gone. It was her."

Mrs. Bates, betraying her shock only by a pallor over which her will had no control, looked down on the pile. John had pawed her own sealskin coat to the top. From its pocket stuck an edge of white paper, which had certainly not been there when she left it. Out of the sudden shock over all her nerves came self-control again. In that instant she formed her white lie.

"Very well," she said. "That's what I wanted to know. My daughter wasn't feeling very well and I sent her home. I was just seeing if she had gone." Still acting, she turned away, turned back again. "That's my coat there? May I have it? I want to look for my handkerchief."

Her hand jerked just once as she took out the dance program, made a pretense of looking through the pockets of the sealskin coat, handed it back, turned away. At the door she stopped and with an appearance of idle curiosity, glanced over the program. Just one little indrawn "ah-h-h" escaped her as she read:

"*Dearest Mother:* I have gone away with Tommy Coulter to get married. The other could not be. I know you'll forgive me when you see how splendid he is. I love you.

NELLIE."

The door opened, closed, shut out the view of Mrs. Bates from the look, now frankly curious, of Fritz the porter. "H'm!" he grunted as he sank down again on the pile of coats and resumed his pipe.

The cornet of Pop Bacon was just blaring for attention and Doc Jones was announcing in his carrying voice — by now a little thickened through the ministration of Mike the bartender — "Git your partners for the Virginia Reel."

Couples were already moving out on the floor. In Mrs. Bates' own corner she saw the black coats and gleaming diamonds of John W. Sabin and of Willie Tutweiler, her own partner for the reel, both peering about the hall. As she approached them Mrs. Bates permitted her society expression to be tinged by a little anxiety.

"I'm so sorry," she said to them both equally. "My daughter has been taken sud-

denly a little ill. I've had her sent some. I must go too. I know you'll excuse us."

"Can I do anything?" asked Mr. Tutweiler conventionally. "Do you want Doctor Jones?"

"Oh, no, indeed," replied Mrs. Bates somewhat hurriedly. "It's nothing serious and we know exactly what to do."

Fortunately Mr. Tutweiler withdrew, murmuring sympathy, and Mrs. Bates turned to Mr. Sabin.

"I want to see you alone — at once!" she said.

Even the sharp tone of her voice failed to convey to the somewhat unimpressionable Mr. Sabin a sense of calamity. His face showed a little concern as he replied: "Don't see exactly how we can get alone — here."

"The cloakroom," said Mrs. Bates briefly — "if we can get rid of that attendant."

By now Doc Jones had shouted "Head lady and foot gent forward and back!" In the two mixed sets, which included all the ladies, hands were patting, feet clumping, voices humming with the orchestra The Arkansaw Traveler. The two unmixed sets, composed solely of fire-

men and male admirers, were much more lively, thanks to Mike the bartender. In the nearest set the head "lady," dancing up to the foot gent, dug him a playful jolt in the body; the gent countered ungallantly on the neck; they squared off in a comedy boxing match. In the other set the head "lady," who sported a fourteen-inch black beard, squeaked "Oh, Mortimer, my darling!" and leaped into the embrace of the head gent. They clinched. Hugging and rolling like bears they bumped deliberately into the line of "ladies," who playfully shoved them back into place, digging their ribs the meanwhile. "Oh, you horrid, coarse men!" squeaked the "lady."

But with all this, Mrs. Bates, making for the cloakroom with John W. Sabin in tow, had a feeling that she was being watched, that the general intelligence had suspected a crisis; and she tried to hold back her speed as she crossed the floor.

Fritz the porter had resumed his smoke.

"Here's a dollar," said John W. Sabin to Fritz. "Go and blow yourself to a drink. No—wait a minute — don't want the footpads to

get into these coats. You watch outside until I tell you to come in. No, keep the dollar."

In the interval while Fritz was taking down his hat and poking to the door Mrs. Bates collected her thoughts and set herself in her plan of action. Straightway she threw her few low cards upon the table.

"She's gone!" she burst out. "Nellie's gone. Run away with that young upstart. Gone to be married! Oh, what shall I do?"

A life passed on the intermittent verge of eternity had schooled John W. Sabin into deadly calm and swift mental action during crises. Whatever emotion was agitating him within showed only in a change of complexion to a lighter tan, in a hard closing of the steel-trap mouth under his great mustache.

"How long ago?" he asked practically.

"Since the second waltz started," said Mrs. Bates, herself brought toward calm by his attitude. "They were seen going out of this door ten or fifteen minutes ago and down the street—that fool there told me."

She waved her hand in the direction taken by the absent Fritz.

"How do you know it's to git married?" asked John W., still with no more emotion in his voice than as though he were a lawyer cross-questioning a witness.

"She left me a note," said Mrs. Bates. "A note saying they were going to be married. Stuck it in the pocket of my coat."

It was all out now; and so suddenly that her will was taken by surprise, there burst forth a storm of tears. She sank down into a comparatively unencumbered chair; dropped her face into her white gloves and her lace handkerchief, which were suddenly bedewed with tears like linen caught out in a thunderstorm. She sobbed lightly but tensely, with little inarticulate "oh's." John W. Sabin was silent; he merely stood looking down upon her. The hawk glance in his eyes gradually softened; the color came back to his tan cheeks, became a flush. When he spoke it was in that same low voice, the syllables clipped as sharply as pistol shots.

"It's awful rough on you," he said, "but you mustn't take on so. We've got to do something — quick!"

"What — can — we — do?" breathed Mrs. Bates between her dying sobs.

John W. Sabin did not answer her directly.

"What cloak is yours?" he asked. "Better put it on — don't want to be seen, maybe, in a ball gown."

When she had dabbed away the last drops of her clearing storm Mrs. Bates found him holding her wrap ready for her. Mrs. Bates, in common with all her type, had the gift of crying exquisitely — not like those transparent blondes whose pink-and-blue baby eyes simply grow blobby with tears. The seriousness of her expression, the touch of carmine coloring in her cheeks and about her eyelids, rendered her only the more comely. Now John W. Sabin was taking down his own overcoat with the ostentatious fur collar, which occupied all alone a nail of honor. Before he put it on, Mrs. Bates saw him reach into the righthand pocket, which bulged with an inner weight, and glimpsed the brown wooden butt of a standard forty-five caliber side arm.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Don't! No gun plays!"

"Sure not," replied John W., "unless somebody else starts it first." He turned on her a sharp glance of inquiry. "You'd rather I handled this matter alone, wouldn't you? Don't want the police or a posse or anything?"

"Heavens, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Bates.

Without another word John W. opened the door. With no word on her part, with no sure idea whither they were going, Mrs. Bates preceded him into the night. The door closed; she stumbled in the darkness.

"Give me your hand—no, the other," said John W.

He took her right hand, which was quivering lightly, into his left; his own right hand, had she only known it, was clamped on the butt of the revolver in his pocket. As they proceeded, he seeming to thread the darkness with cat's eyes, she sobbed gently now and then. Once, indeed, her sobs grew audible, threatening a new storm, but the firm pressure of his hand steadied her and the sound died away on a long sigh. They were making toward a single light outlining a window sash; and Mrs. Bates caught, through the fresh scents of a mountain night, the smell

of horses. Then he spoke in his sharp clipped accents of a man of action; and his question seemed at first unaccountably far from the subject in hand.

"Say," he said, "is your daughter a Catholic?"

"Why, no," said Mrs. Bates, vaguely wondering through all her anxiety and misery what this had to do with the case.

"Then we won't bother Father Casey," said John W.

Now they stood opposite a big blank door, vaguely outlined by the side beams from the window.

"Hello, inside!" bawled John W., and listened. He got no answer. He drew his gun and smote the door three sharp taps with the barrel.

"Who is it?" said a voice, so near and distinct as to prove that the speaker had been all the time behind the door.

"John W. Sabin!"

At these magic words came a rattle of metal. The big door slid back, revealing outlined against the oil lamp the tousled head of a man in his shirt sleeves.

"It's me, Bob," said John W. "First thing—have you let a team in the last half hour?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Sabin," said Bob. "Not more than a quarter of an hour back. To a young fellow—he came here a spell before that and asked us to hitch up—and a girl." The blotched outline which was Bob's head turned toward Mrs. Bates, whose face was now clear in the rays of the lamplight.

"This lady's daughter, the girl was."

This rapid identification seemed to remind John W. Sabin of the widespread curiosity in the camp concerning the Bates women; for he shot out: "Thanks. It's all right to tell that to me. But if anybody else asks you, you don't know nothin'—you or Eddie, either. Get that? You're to be a pair of graveyards on the subjects of the events and incidents of this evenin', now and subsequent. Where's Eddie?"

"Just turning in. Ed-die! Mr. Sabin wants you!"

"What rig did you give 'em?"

"Single rig—phaëton—and that little buckskin hoss."

"No speed—I've drove him," mused John W.

aloud; then his voice took on its sharp shooting tone. "Now listen hard. Have you got your riding horse saddled as usual? All right. Eddie's to hitch up my bays to the light buckboard as quick as the Lord will let him. You're to jump on your cayuse and rustle round to Parson Brown and that new Methodist preacher, whatever his name is, and find whether they've married anybody this evenin'. If you find 'em marrying that special and particular couple, stop it—tell 'em I said it was to be stopped."

"How about Judge Larrabee and Justice of the Peace Smith?" asked Bob. "They're authorized——"

"Now don't you go to assumin' nothin' from my few brief remarks," said John W. "Judge Larrabee and Al Smith were at the Firemen's Ball, not marrying nobody when I left 'em."

They were interrupted by the slouching appearance of Eddie with a lantern.

"Git my bays into the buckboard, you—and quick!" said John W. "All right, Bob. You ride. Anybody in the office there? No, never mind, I'll tend to the lamp."

As Bob and Eddie turned away, John W.

lighted a match, illuminating the untidy cubby-hole which served for the office of the Elite Livery and Boarding Stables. Before it went out he had brushed the loose newspapers from a chair and seated Mrs. Bates.

"Guess you won't want a light," he said. "There, there—cry it out! I'm goin' to help Eddie hitch up."

Three minutes later the bays stood harnessed and stamping impatiently beside the open sliding door. The side lamps on the buckboard were both lighted. A few long minutes more, and the clatter of hoofs announced Bob's return. Mrs. Bates rose and stood clinging to the door frame in the darkness.

"Well!" came the voice of John W. Sabin.

"No weddin's this evening," said Bob, dismounting. "I pounded 'em both out of bed."

"Would you mind gettin' in?" came the voice of John W.

Though darkness hid from her his face, Mrs. Bates knew that the request was meant for her. She clambered up into the seat; John W. sprang up beside her; Bob and Eddie loosed their hold

on the bits of the eager bays; they shot out into Galena Avenue.

"Where are we going?" asked Mrs. Bates, who had, as advised, cried a good deal of it out, and now held control of her voice. Up to that moment she had yielded herself unquestionably to the commands of Mr. Sabin.

"I've covered everybody who could perform a marriage in this here camp," said John W. Sabin. "From the start I suspected that they'd get a rig and go to Beantown."

"Beantown?" inquired Mrs. Bates.

"Six miles over toward the range," said John W. "Separate township, where I can't stop anything. McDougall, who's city clerk and J. P. there, is a crook. Always filing claims we wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. And marryin' people. The Harkness case got all over the front page of the Clarion last week. Figure that's what put it into her mind—her and her man."

Mrs. Bates, through the confusion of the tangled black emotions that were rising up in her again, found space to marvel that Mr. Sabin spoke of both her daughter and the young man

without a shade of asperity—just as substantial, impersonal facts. This brought to mind another aspect of her misery—the hopes she had held for her daughter — now, whatever else happened, dashed and broken. She had already partially given way in the presence of Mr. Sabin, which made it easier now to give way completely. Through her sobs she began speaking wildly, hysterically:

"She was always a little minx—never could tell what she was thinking about. And her Latin and her French and her music—in a miner's shanty! And I worked so to educate her—and I loved her so—oh-h!"

John W., master reinsman that he was, held the lines gathered expertly in his left hand. He transferred them to the hand which held the whip and dropped a touch, heavy yet comforting, though not in the least familiar or assuming, upon the sealskin shoulder beside him. But he said nothing; and she, too, spoke no more, as though this comforting touch were a command to silence. The storm beat itself out, ended at last in a long sighing.

They were clear of the town now, and thread-

ing a broken mesa whose clumps of sagebrush showed here and there in the light of the side lamps. The bays had settled down to their best, steadiest stride. Suddenly the hand which Mr. Sabin had rested upon the shoulder of his companion shot to the reins, pulled them violently inward even to his chest. But the bays needed no pulling. They had checked themselves so suddenly that the dashboard collided with their rumps; they were digging in their toes before a newly-felled tree, which showed in the lamplight across their path.

No sooner had they come to comparative rest than John W. shot both reins to his left hand, shot his right to the butt of his revolver. There he checked himself. The presence of ladies is always inconvenient in a purely masculine affair.

And, as he expected, from behind the bushy branches of the pine tree rose a hat and a bearskin mask, came a voice saying thickly, as though disguised: "Hands up! You're covered!"

"Put up your hands," said John W. to Mrs.

Bates, himself setting the example. "Them pesterin' footpads!"

"Line up—there on the road!" said one voice. "No monkeyin'. There's three of us!"

"Now look here, boys," said John W. Sabin, "I'm out on a matter of life-and-death business. I've got about a thousand dollars gold in my jeans. You can have that. I'll chuck it to you if you'll let me put my hands down. You ought to know I wouldn't shoot, with a lady on board."

"Hell!" came the voice of First Footpad, registering even through its disguise of pebbles under the tongue both surprise and disgust. "Who are you?"

"John W. Sabin," said the voice from the buckboard, in the accents with which royalty might announce "The King."

"Sister Anne and Simple Simon!" came the thick voice of First Footpad; and the tone implied a disappointment too great for ordinary profanity. Whispers, mingled now and then with an audible oath, proceeded from behind the felled pine tree.

Then out came a disguised voice: "All right. Push along. We ain't robbin' you."

"That's right good of you boys," said John W. "Can I put down my hands to get these lines? Thanks. That's right. Just pull that tree back. Say"—he paused with the reins half gathered, as one who is caught by a new idea—"if I chuck you fellers a handful of twenties will you go home peaceable for the night and leave this here road alone? I may want it later, and I'll be in a hurry."

"All right!" came the muttering voice of Second Footpad, who, dimly outlined by the starlight, was dragging at the butt of the tree, "Might as well knock off. Been a night of hard luck."

Mr. Sabin reached to his trousers pocket, cast out a shower which glinted in the side lamps, which made a jingling on the roadway.

"Oh, say, you understand I'm forgettin' this little episode! Get up!" he clucked to the horses.

But Mrs. Bates, until now forgotten in this purely masculine affair, spoke from the seat beside him.

"Better ask them if they've seen Nellie!" Her voice was perfectly firm.

"Oh sure!" said John W., pulling up again. "Boys, seen anything on this road of a single rig — phaëton, wall-eyed, rat-tailed buckskin horse, couple of people aboard — tall man, young, and a girl?"

"—— ——, yes!" said the disguised voice of Second Footpad. "Excuse me, lady. That was the first streak of hard luck this evenin'. Stuck 'em up not five minutes ago, and got nothin' but drink money."

"How'd that happen?" asked John W. casually.

"He couldn't make no gunplay any more than you could, because he had a lady aboard," said First Footpad. He continued volubly though thickly, as one glad to break the monotony of a lonely calling by a little social converse: "Females always was my bane and menace. The girl talked us out of takin' anythin' off him but a little tip of ten dollars. She allowed they was just married and needed it to set up housekeeping."

"Married!" The one word shot out of Mrs. Bates before she could control herself.

"Must have got married awful sudden," said

John W., still affecting a casual, gossipy tone. "It's the outfit we've been looking for, and they weren't married when last seen."

"Yep," said First Footpad, breaking into the conversation. "They drawed all the luck that's loose to-night in this neck of the woods. We didn't git none of it. They was makin' for Beantown because they didn't want to git hitched in Carbonado for some reason or other. They bumped onto Judge McDougall a-drivin' on the road. He got right down and hitched 'em on the spot. The little girl told us all about it. Durn nice girl. The young feller's drew a prize winner, all right."

"Where've they gone now?" asked John W.

First Footpad let a laugh bubble through the pebbles under his tongue.

"That's the joke of it!" said he. "They're in the funniest fix you ever did see, and they don't give a durn, as I figure it, on account of love's young dream. For some reason or other they're shy on Carbonado, but they're afraid if he holds out that bronco he hired from the Elite Stables he'll bump up against it for hoss stealin'. So they've went into retirement until daybreak,

when he figures he can hire somebody on the road to drive the bronco back. Girl told us all about it while we was congratulatin' and felicitatin' 'em. Oh, we had a regular party! Only needed oyster stew and strawberry ice cream to make it a Friday night sociable."

"But where are they holding out? asked John W. with a laugh that sounded a little forced.

"Said they was goin' to them abandoned cabins of the Jennie D., half a mile up the side road over there," replied First Footpad.

"All right," said John W. Sabin. "Guess we'll go and congratulate 'em, too. Remember, boys, nothin' happened to-night far's I'm concerned—or this lady either. But if I was you I'd scoop up those twenties out there in the road and use 'em to buy stage fare to some camp over the Divide. You've treated me decent, so I don't mind tellin' you, by way of returning favors, that the city marshal is gettin' all ready for a general roundup of the hull of you. Of course if there's anythin' like lynchin', I'll say a good word for you, but I wish you'd save me the trouble. Good night. Giddap."

CHAPTER XI

THE married couple of an hour sat just inside the doorway of a half-ruined log cabin, the second in the line of three which marked the site of that notorious failure, the Jennie D. Though now and then one or the other stirred to kiss or to murmur rapturous nothings, they were mostly silent.

The truth is that actuality was creeping into the dream, as actuality will. With it came worry as to the next move. Getting a job to support a wife had seemed, in the inspiration of action, like nothing at all. Now it seemed a very great something. Carbonado was impracticable on account of the baronlike power swayed by the great and offended John W. The best chance was Cottonwood Camp. Tommy was not sure about the fare to Cottonwood. It would certainly make a big hole in the hundred and twenty dollars that remained after paying Judge McDougall's fee and tipping the footpads.

To Nellie, actuality brought thoughts more

distributing to the emotions. The face of her mother, reading that note, would glance in and out of her mental vision. At one instant she felt like a very little girl who wants to tell her mother she is sorry, to be cuddled and caressed. To blot the picture and down the thought she began speaking; and she, too, he noted, was running on the subject of her dress.

"Most girls," she said, forcing a little laugh, "want to get married in a white silk dress with a veil and orange blossoms and lots of cut flowers and ushers and bridesmaids and a wedding reception. I never did. What I really wanted to do was to elope, but I felt I didn't care how I married so long as I loved the man. But see—I have been married in a fine silk dress and white gloves, and my columbine boy was all the flowers I wanted. And I did have a wedding reception—those robbers!"

Now her laugh was genuine.

"Sort of chivaree. Sort of——"

He stopped suddenly on the word; and the stiffening of his frame warned her also into silence. Footsteps, cautious and muffled yet distinct, sounded from the trail below the first

cabin. He was instantly on his feet, but crouching.

"Get back in there—as far back as you can get—and keep low," he commanded masterfully.

He followed her; but he stopped just inside the darkness beside the open door. Looking back over her shoulder as she tiptoed, she could see in the starlight that he was crouching; and she heard a sharp metallic click. Silence for a moment; then the footsteps again. They seemed now to have reached the ruins of the first cabin. Tommy's voice came out so suddenly and clearly that she started and cowered for an instant against the wall.

"Halt! Who are you? I've got you covered!"

The footsteps ceased; for perhaps ten seconds the silence was again absolute. Then spoke a voice which she recognized instantly as that of John W. Sabin.

"If you're the young feller that's jest eloped with Miss Bates, I wouldn't make no gun plays. You're likely to hit your mother-in-law. If you're anybody else, lemme call your attention to the fact and circumstances that the barrel

of your gat ain't browned, and I've got it spotted. And also covered. Avoid nickel plate on gun barrels. No, don't move it—steady now. I like to know jest where you are!"

"It's Mr. Sabin!" whispered Nellie from the shadows. "Don't shoot," she called aloud. "It's us, mother—and we're married."

A feminine voice with a wail in it came out of the darkness behind the ruins: "Yes, go on and shoot. Do! After what you've done to me to-night—"

Nellie had crossed the dark floor to her new husband's side before she interrupted: "Now, mother, don't blame this on Tommy. He knows as well as I do that I got him to do it."

"That's not so," interrupted Tommy in his turn. "I'm responsible."

"I believe you," said Mrs. Bates, entirely ignoring the interruption of her son-in-law. "I believe you—I think you'd be capable of anything. After all I've done to make you a lady! Didn't I always know just how sly you were? Didn't I—" Her voice choked.

"Mother," said Nellie, perfectly calmly, "when you think it over you're going to see it

was the only way. Mr. Sabin, she brought me up here to marry you — because you were rich. And, Mr. Sabin, I didn't want to marry you. I wanted to marry Tommy from the first minute I saw him. I have married him. And I'm going away to make a start with him if I have to work my fingers to the bone."

She let her hand flutter to the shoulder of Tommy, still holding his cocked revolver trained in a general way on the darkness—being still uncertain as to the consequences of taking it away.

"Him!" exclaimed Mrs. Bates. "Him! A nobody from nowhere that you've only known four days. Came and sneaked you from me. Didn't have the manhood —"

That's enough, mother!" cut in Nellie.

"And Mr. Sabin — the finest man I ever knew — Oh, if you'd been with me to-night you'd know what a nature he's got!"

"I'm certain he is a fine man," Nellie said; "and if you feel that way about it, why don't you marry him yourself?"

A blank, dead silence followed. It was broken first by the slight rustle made by Tommy as he

rose from his uncomfortable position and gently let down the hammer of his revolver. Nellie touched him in the darkness. His free hand went round her. He started to say something, but she stopped him with a "Sh-h-h," and her hand felt for his mouth.

Absolute silence again; then a smothered colloquy from the ruins of the first cabin; then John W. Sabin's positive voice slashed the darkness: "Well, I've just asked her!"

Nellie, from her nest in her husband's free arm, gave a little shake of delight.

"What are you going to do about it, mother?" she asked.

It was John W. Sabin who answered:

"She says she won't. She's got a fool notion that if she takes me now I'll think she's taking me for my money."

"Now, Mr. Sabin," said Nellie, "I know mother like a book. She's been just crazy about you from the minute she met you. I suppose there's where I get this habit of love at first sight." This last was partly for Tommy's benefit, and Nellie punctuated her words by a soft pat on his cheek. "Only she's always

wanted me to marry well — mother's been a perfect dandy to me — and she just wouldn't entertain the idea. She's been talking about you night and day — and it wasn't for my benefit, either. She was just keeping the idea back — weren't you, mother? — because she wanted me to be happy — and she thought anybody must be happy married to you. Of course, there was the money, too — she wanted me to have money. Mother and I quarreled this evening and I've treated her dreadfully. But, Mr. Sabin, she's the most perfect dear!"

Nellie paused, as if to judge the effect of her words. Only silence for a moment.

"Ask her if she wouldn't take you this very moment if you were as poor as we are!" said Nellie.

Again she listened. At first only silence, so that the sound of a distant catamount complaining of the night, the ripple of Bear Creek, the gentle rustling of dwarf-pine branches, came almost painfully loud. Then the murmuring voices down in the shadows of the first cabin began again, and Nellie gave another eager,

exultant squirm against the shoulder of the waiting Tommy.

And suddenly came the voice of John W. Sabin, not with its customary firm attack, but much more softly.

"Young feller, when that there Judge McDougall stopped to marry you" — on these words both the lovers gave a start of surprise — "was he makin' for Carbonado or Beantown?"

"Going home to Beantown," said Tommy; and realized that he had hitherto been very much out of the conversation.

"All right," said John W. Sabin. "Say, daughter-in-law, tell your man to hitch up that wall-eyed buckskin and drive you back to Carbonado. We'll meet you at the Maison Riche in an hour — for the weddin' supper."

Down the dark trail went Mr. Sabin and Mrs. Bates. The lovers within the second cabin wisely said nothing more, but only embraced each other in the darkness, listening to the soft murmur of conversation, to the rustling footsteps, to more low, inaudible conversation, which like the footsteps died gradually into

nothing. Only one thing did they hear distinctly.

It came toward the last, in the voice of Mrs. Bates: "Well, I declare — that child has had her way with me again!"

(THE END)